Small Fissures in Reality: A Critical Analysis of the Artifice Short Story

Preface

This thesis investigates 'Artifice[1]' short stories; stories in which one impossible element is introduced into an otherwise normative context, whereupon characters adapt to a new fictive universe (as originally proposed by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*).

In writing this thesis, I draw on both my Practice as Research, and on my experience between 2005-2016 of working as an editor at Comma Press, a publishing house based in Manchester, UK, specialising in the short story. During my time at Comma Press, I worked with a number of exponents of the Artifice short story and their translators, most notably Adam Marek and David Constantine (UK), Hassan Blasim (Iraq/Finland, trans Jonathan Wright), and Paweł Huelle (Poland, trans Antonia Lloyd-Jones). The experience of working on their books, including discussions about narrative structure, has been formative in my thinking about the Artifice short story structure; its possibilities, challenges and limitations. Their influence looms large in both my Practice as Research and in this critical thesis, which draws in particular on close textual analysis of the stories of Marek and Blasim. Above all, my thinking on the Artifice form has been influenced by Comma Press founder and editor-in-chief Ra Page; some of the concepts explored herein were first shaped over several years of discussion with Page.

Todorov, in first proposing the Artifice story form, does not give it a name; I instead derive it from Page's introduction to the short story anthology *Parenthesis:* 'Some stories have such a high content of artifice or unreality [that] they offer themselves as an immediate sub-species […] — the "Artifice story" — the archetype of which would have to be Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'' (Page, 2006: iv). Page

[1] A note on capitalisation: when referring specifically to a genre definition applied by a given critic, I capitalise the term for clarity, e.g. Todorov's Fantastic (as opposed to the broader corpus of fantasy, or fantastic literature). Likewise I capitalise Artifice to denote my own genre definition.

himself borrows the term from Jorge Luis Borges' use of 'Artifices' as the title for Part Two of his collected stories: *Fictions* (Borges, [1965] 1998: 93-152).

On a point of disambiguation: some critics have used the term 'artifice' to broadly refer to the nature of the short story form. Notably, prominent short story critic Charles E May proposes artifice as an intrinsic property of short stories:

> I have always believed that although the short story is a "natural" form, it is at the same time a form of high "artifice". […] it has a long tradition of developing certain literary conventions that make reading a short story a different experience than reading a novel.
>
> May, 2011

For May, artifice is an aesthetic characteristic of the short form. By representing the world in a compressed form (compared to the novel), it presents a higher degree of unreality to the reader. While I'm broadly sympathetic to this notion, my investigations are formalist: to explore and define the properties and mechanisms of a particular species of story; one which introduces a hitherto impossible and inexplicable event into the normative story-world.

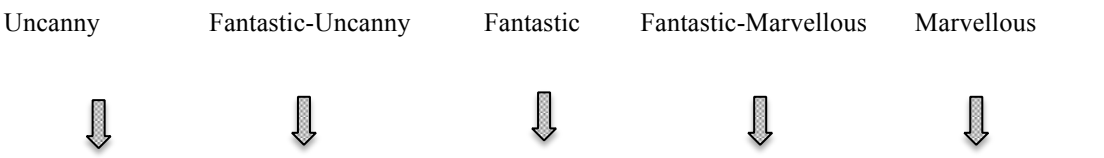
My short story collection *Mayflies* demonstrates some of the creative possibilities of the Artifice form, as well as the technical challenges it poses to the writer. Many of the *Mayflies* stories exemplify the Artifice form, while others do not meet the criteria, and will, I hope, help to illustrate what *isn't* Artifice fiction. I will attempt to make these distinctions along the way; for ease of references, I also indicate which of the *Mayflies* stories qualify as Artifice, according to my own criteria, in the Appendix.

1. Introduction — Todorov and the Fantastic

Tzvetan Todorov's morphology *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* ([1973] 1975) proposes the existence of something akin to the Artifice story structure, without naming it or offering more than a preliminary exploration of its mechanisms. Nonetheless, within a short few pages, Todorov's *lemma* on Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' plants the seed from which this thesis germinates.

In *The Fantastic,* Todorov classifies Fantastic literature as that which presents an 'unreal', 'supernatural', or 'unheard of' event or escalating series of events, and which invites the reader to hesitate between explanations: of the inexplicable event being of natural or supernatural provenance (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 41, 169). This hesitation — a reader-response implicitly anticipated by the text, according to Todorov — is prevalent in, for example, the ghost stories of Henry James, Guy de Maupassant, and Jan Potocki. The reader, and often the protagonist, hesitates between two possibilities: is the ghost real? Or is the ghost a figment of the protagonist's imagination?

Variations in the manner of explication of the seemingly impossible event, and whether explication occurs at all, lead Todorov to propose the following categories: Uncanny (after Freud), Fantastic-Uncanny, Fantastic, Fantastic-Marvellous and Marvellous.



(fig 1: Uncanny/Marvellous axis. Todorov 44)

The Uncanny category includes stories of horror or unease that do not suggest a supernatural explanation — here Todorov cites stories of Poe and Ambrose Bierce (ibid: 47); in the Fantastic-Uncanny, events that 'seem supernatural throughout a story receive a rational explanation at the end' (ibid: 44); Fantastic-Marvellous stories also engender hesitation, but eventually resolve with a supernatural explanation for which Todorov cites Théophile Gautier's 'La Morte Amoureuse' and Villiers de l'Isles

Adam's 'Véra' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 52-53); in Marvellous stories, the only available explanation throughout is supernatural. For Todorov, only stories that maintain a state of hesitation throughout the narrative — keeping both plates spinning, so to speak — qualify as purely Fantastic.

In the final pages of *The Fantastic*, Todorov briefly notes the existence of a genre of story that does not fit into any of the categories on his axis, citing Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' as an archetype.

> [In the fantastic-marvellous text, the function of hesitation has been] …to prepare the way for the perception of the unheard-of event and to characterise the transition from the natural to the supernatural. Here [in 'The Metamorphosis'], it is a contrary movement which is described: that of *adaptation*, which follows the inexplicable event and which characterises the transition from the supernatural to the natural. Hesitation and adaptation designate two symmetrical and converse processes.
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> Todorov, [1973] 1975: 171

Todorov then cites Camus on the ambivalence of Kafka's characters towards supernatural happenings: 'we shall never be sufficiently amazed about this lack of amazement' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 169). In this respect, the most remarkable thing about 'The Metamorphosis' is not that it's set in a world in which you can turn into a bug[2], but that it's set in a world in which you can turn into a bug without anyone being particularly taken aback, a quality described by US critic Brian McHale as the 'the rhetoric of contrastive banality' (McHale: 1987: 76). In this kind of story, the reaction of the characters to supernatural data — or non-reaction — posits a recalibrated universe. As Todorov puts it, 'what in the first world [the world of the fantastic story] was an exception, here becomes the rule' (Todorov, [1973] 1975:

[2] As Walter Sokel and others note, a more accurate translation of the original German term is *Ungeziefer*. 'German usage applies the term *Ungeziefer* (vermin) to persons considered low or contemptible, even as our usage of 'cockroach' describes a person as a spineless and miserable character' (Sokel, 1966: 5). But as 'vermin' has slightly different connotations in English, I will use 'bug'.

174). This quality — of characters adapting to a supernatural event — is, I propose, a defining characteristic of the Artifice story.

Critical Responses to Todorov

Much of the critical reaction to *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* vectored on Todorov's classification of the Fantastic story (and his reliance on the notion of a predictable reader-response of hesitation), rather than the process of adaptation, which is my primary interest. However, given that the latter concept is built upon on the former, I must necessarily engage with critical responses to *The Fantastic* as a whole, and in particular, the attacks on Todorov's assumptions about implied reader-response, allegory, and taxonomic categorization.

On Implied Reader-Response

Todorov's insistence on reader-response (of hesitation, or, in the case 'The Metamorphosis', adaptation) as an implied property of the text is inherently problematic: '*The text must oblige* [my emphasis] the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 33).

This assumes a predictable, immutable reader-response to a text; a concept under scrutiny in a post-structuralist context, and as the Polish SF writer and critic Stanisław Lem extrapolates in 'Todorov's Fantastic Theory of Literature' (Lem, 1974: 227-237), with this approach Todorov is designating binary correct or incorrect readings of a story: correct if it accords with Todorov's own view, incorrect if not.

In contrast, my own criteria for the Artifice story structure do not insist on any particular reader-response, but on the depiction of characters adapting to supernatural events 'on the page', which I'll discuss further in the chapter 'Astonishment and Expectation'.

On Allegorical Interpretation

For Todorov, 'poetic' means language of symbolism or metaphor that self-consciously stands for something else, whereupon its integrity as a literal utterance collapses. He insists that the fantastic text should resist allegorical or poetic

interpretation (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 33). Likewise, he argues, 'The Metamorphosis' confounds allegorical reading:

> One might certainly suggest several allegorical interpretations of the text; but the text itself offers no explicit indication which would confirm any of them. It is often said of Kafka that his narratives must be read above all as narratives on the literal level. The event described in 'The Metamorphosis' is quite as real as in any other literary event.
>
> Todorov, [1973] 1975:172

An allegorical reading might permit the reader to disengage with the process of adaptation; the reader could dismiss the story as fable — a fictional analogue of a real world situation the reader already knows — rather than an autonomous context that must be adapted to on its own terms. Kafka himself laments the fact that a written text is beholden to its referents in the real world:

> Metaphors are among many things that make me despair of writing. Writing's lack of independence, its dependence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove, even on the poor old human being warming himself. These are all independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, cannot live by itself, is a joke and a despair.
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> Kafka [1921] 1988: 200-201

We might infer from this that when Kafka writes stories that include an impossible element (e.g. 'The Metamorphosis', 'A Hunger Artist', 'A Country Doctor'), he is attempting to grant writing its independence; the impossible element found in each story cannot be imported back into the world of the reader, and so the story stands as an independent artefact, rather than a metaphor. Similarly, when stories invite satirical or ironic readings, their independence is undermined — the reader is diverted to their real world analogue, and the process of adaptation desists. In Donald Barthelme's words: 'Irony deprives the object of its reality' (Barthelme, [1961] 2005: 31).

The British author and critic Christine Brooke-Rose, however, elegantly contests the notion that the Fantastic story must resist metaphorical reading, pointing out that if, according to Todorov's logic, the very act of hesitation (the defining

characteristic of the fantastic text), necessarily demands the reader entertains two possibilities (natural/supernatural explanation of the inexplicable event), why can the reader not likewise hesitate between literal/allegorical readings (Brooke-Rose, [1976] 1983: 155)? She uses the example of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* to demonstrate that, in some fantastic texts, a 'literal' reading can be mapped onto an 'uncanny' reading and 'allegorical' mapped onto 'marvellous' — and as such, the reader hesitates between literal and allegorical poles. In the short story form, one might consider A S Byatt's 'July Ghost' (Byatt, 1988; 39-55), which similarly hedges literal and allegorical readings: is the protagonist really seeing a ghost, or is this an allegory for the grieving process? Lem (1974: 233) takes the point further, proposing that, to map the reader-reaction to a text, one would need to use a multi-axis 'compass card', charting a multitude of decisions and suppositions.

In my view these objections are entirely valid and, in formulating my own working definition of the Artifice story, and I've jettisoned Todorov's stipulation that Fantastic texts (and by extrapolation, Artifice texts) must resist allegorical reading. I discuss the relationship between Artifice stories and metaphor, allegory and fable at length in Chapter Five: 'Artifice and Allegory'.

On Taxonomic Categorization

Todorov's early works, including *The Fantastic,* followed antecedents in Russian Formalism (after Propp), the Prague School, and Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* ([1957] 2000), in attempting to classify texts according to their structural properties by formulating 'general laws', as described by the British formalist critic Joe Andrew: 'Essentially taxonomic in approach, his work did not, however, eschew problems of meaning but rather argued that there can be no meaning outside of these "general laws"' (Andrew, 1986: 353).

Todorov borrows from science, evoking Mendeleev's periodic table of elements, and postulating theoretical genres that might not yet exist, but which *could* exist. He discusses this tactic in relation to Northrop Frye's system of genres in *Anatomy of Criticism:*

> There are a certain number of genres not because more have not been observed, but because the principle of the system imposes that number. It is

> therefore necessary to deduce all the possible combinations from the categories chosen. We might even say that if one of these combinations had in fact never been manifested, we should describe it even more deliberately; just as in Mendeleev's system one could describe the properties of elements not yet discovered, similarly we shall describe here the properties of genres — and therefore works — still to come.
>
> Todorov, [1973] 1975: 14

Brooke-Rose objects that: 'Todorov, who, having postulated theoretical possibilities as a concept, in practice relies wholly on historical genres to elaborate his own theory of the Fantastic'. (Brooke-Rose, 1976: 150). In fairness to Todorov, it's difficult to understand quite how she expects him to provide examples of theoretically possible texts that don't exist, as they are, by definition, not yet written.[3] Lem also objects to the range of texts that Todorov offers as specimens:

> Todorov's "sample", as displayed in his bibliography, is astonishing. Among its twenty-seven titles we find no Borges, no Verne, no Wells, nothing from modern fantasy, and all of SF is represented by two short stories. […] A theory of literature either embraces all works or it is no theory.
>
> Lem, 1974: 228

On the face of it, this might seem a reasonable objection: Todorov hasn't done his homework. But Lem has misrepresented Todorov's aim, which is not to propose a theory of literature that embraces all works. Richard Astle defends Todorov on this issue, stating that the: 'purpose in that portion of the book that Lem attacks is a simple one: to investigate a literary category, a "genre" characterized by a particular effect, and to discover the rule that defines this category' (Astle, 1975: 167). In other words, Todorov selects texts that he believes exemplify the structural characteristics he wishes to discuss, rather than presenting an exhaustive taxonomy.

Part of the problem seems to arise from Todorov's use of the word 'Fantastic' — a label he applies to a specific set of stories that present a supernatural occurrence,

[3] It is to my advantage that through my Practice as Research I have been afforded the opportunity to do precisely this — to write stories into existence in order to explore formal possibilities: for example, the three Ghost Stories within *Mayflies* which share an identical opening: one version progresses in a Fantastic mode, while the others exemplify variations on the Artifice Form.

and, he infers, engender a reader-reaction of hesitation between supernatural and natural explication. As Robert Scholes says:

> Todorov has taken, here, a word normally used to designate a large and spongy tract of literature and given that name to a narrow pathway. From this, much disputation has begun to spring. […] According to Todorov, the whole point of generic analysis is to refine generic awareness by excluding, sharpening critical focus until a closely related group of texts may be studied together.
>
> Scholes, 1975

As Astle argues, Todorov's use of the term 'Fantastic' invites straw-man objections from Lem: 'It is Todorov's fate, or perhaps his carelessness (not seeing Lem in the bushes, waiting to pounce), to have chosen for the name of this effect a word, "fantastic", which means something quite different to Lem' (Astle, 1975: 168).

Lem holds that applying methodologies from the fields of mathematics, chemistry and botany to literary texts results in a pseudo-science of literature, which collapses under analysis: 'representativeness of a sample in the natural sciences and in the arts are two quite different matters. Every normal tiger is representative for that species of cats, but there is no such thing as a "normal story"' (Lem, 1974: 228).

Furthermore, Lem proposes that any taxonomical literary theory is prone to creating an Oedipus effect, as authors attempt to write stories in defiance of taxonomic rules: '…the literary scholar's acts of classification are feedback-linked to that which is classified, i.e. the Oedipus effect manifests itself in literature. […] What could be more tempting than to write what theory prohibits?' (Lem 1974: 228).

However, in my own reading of Todorov, his definition of the Fantastic (again, according to his own strict use of the term, rather than its general application) is not prohibitive; he nowhere states that any particular story structure *doesn't* exist, but rather defines the characteristics of stories he's interested in (to wit, stories that engender hesitation). Indeed, Todorov's proposal of what I call the 'Artifice' story structure arises specifically from just such an outlying case: his discussion of 'The Metamorphosis' as a story with a structure that *does not* conform to his definition of the Fantastic tale (engendering, as he proposes, adaptation rather than hesitation) (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 171).

In defining the properties of the Artifice story, I do not intend to provide an exhaustive survey or taxonomy, nor argue for the re-classification of stories that are considered to be exemplars of other genres, including magic realism or SF. I wish merely to delineate and examine the narrative mechanisms of a narrow selection of stories that accord with my own Artifice criteria and reflect on how their workings have shaped my approach to writing original Artifice fiction.

Todorov's lacuna, and the formulation of my definition of the Artifice story

In summary, while Todorov's *The Fantastic* invites criticism, I believe that its central thrust — that the narrative mechanism of certain stories might be understood by examining their introduction of a supernatural event into a normative context — remains a useful tool for textual analysis, and can be salvaged if his criteria are modified a little, as I construct my own definition of the Artifice story.

Firstly, I will jettison Todorov's insistence that hesitation ought to be experienced *universally by readers* of the Fantastic story (and accordingly, that adaptation need not be experienced by readers of the Artifice story). Instead, my definition of the Artifice story insists only that one or more characters adapts to the impossible event 'on the page' — that is, can be seen to accept its actuality.

I will also discard Todorov's insistence that a fantastic text precludes poetic, metaphorical or allegorical interpretation, while I remain sympathetic to the notion that, as a reader's cognitive faculties are diverted to mapping an allegorical story onto its real-world analogue, their commitment to the fictive world of the story might diminish (although this is by no means a binary process), and therefore, that a writer of Artifice stories might adopt a strategy of complicating seemingly straightforward allegories, with the intention of steering the reader away from neat interpretation.

Finally, I will not attempt anything so bold as an exhaustive taxonomy of the Artifice story, but instead will identify a narrow set of stories that seem to me to exemplify it, and analyse their narrative mechanisms.

Artifice Story Criteria

This leads me to propose the following preliminary criteria for the Artifice story:

1) That it contains an event that is hitherto impossible and inexplicable within the normative world of the story.
2) That there is only one impossible event, or a sequence of conditional impossible events proceeding from the first.
3) That one or more characters must be seen to adapt to the impossible event — that is, to accept its actuality.

For definitional purposes, it does not matter how early or late in the text the impossible event occurs, or how early or late in the text the character adaptation occurs. I also propose no explicit prohibition on length, which would mean stipulating an arbitrary figure, but I'll focus primarily on short stories, as a literary form that I have found, in my own practice, to be suited to the Artifice structure. According to editor Ra Page, 'Brevity [within the short story] cannot be a mere whim or accident of composition, it must be inherent in the first idea, like a radioactive half-life, making any extension of the material or lengthening of the plot impossible without destroying the story' (Page, 2006: iv). I'll discuss brevity and the Artifice story further in the chapter 'Adaptation, Speed and Misdirection'.

2. Astonishment and Expectation

In this chapter, I'll examine the defining characteristics of the Artifice story in relation to my own work and the stories of others. Specifically, I'll ask:

- How should the Artifice story — and the process of adaptation — be defined?
- What kinds of adaptation might be possible, and what kinds of different Artifice story could there be?

Todorov volunteers three conditions that must be met for a text to be considered Fantastic, before asserting that in 'The Metamorphosis' '…it is a contrary movement which is described: that of adaptation, which follows the inexplicable event and which characterises the transition from the supernatural to the natural' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 171).

In order to arrive at a propaedeutic definition of the Artifice story, I'll examine how Todorov's three conditions for the Fantastic might pertain to this 'contrary' Artifice structure, considering critical responses to Todorov, and reflecting on my own Practice as Research.

Does reader-response matter?

Todorov's first condition for the Fantastic is as follows:

> First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described.
>
> Todorov, [1973] 1975: 33

How can we be sure that readers will hesitate (or indeed adapt) to supernatural data in a story? How can we verify what Todorov calls their obligation? And when we say a reader has adapted, what does that actually mean, in terms of their cognitive process?

Lem (1974) objects that, in this approach Todorov is designating binary correct or incorrect hermeneutic readings for a story: correct if the reader complies with the intentions of the author, and incorrect if they don't. As Barthes notes in *The Death of*

the Author, 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single, "theological" meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of the original, blend and clash.' (Barthes, 1967: 146). Barthes valorises the role of the reader: 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination […] the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes, 1967: 148). But regardless of who you hold to be the primary owner of a text's meaning — if anyone — this meaning cannot entirely accord between one reader to another, let alone between author and reader. The intentions of an author are as inscrutable as the mind of each of its possible readers.

Lem redoubles his objection, claiming that Todorov's first condition implies that the writer must 'see to it that the silliest twaddle about spirits sends chills up and down [the reader's] spine' (Lem, 1974), in order to engender hesitation.

This, however, misrepresents Todorov's position. Todorov does not demand that the reader believes the story to be true. Hesitation in the Fantastic is not about an actual belief in the existence of supernatural phenomena abroad in the world, but about the reader suspending disbelief[4] as they anticipate where the story will lead and what will become of the characters, which might be approximately voiced as: *Will it transpire that the ghost is supposed to be real?* This accords with John Clute's definition of fantasy as inhabiting 'worlds which are impossible *but which the story believes* [author's emphasis]' (Clute, 2001: 114).

That is not to say that ghost stories cannot discomfort a reader, for example by attuning their senses to bumps in the night. But readers, hesitating in the face of a supernatural event they encounter in a story, need not restructure their entire *Lebenswelt*[5] belief system. One can be rational and spooked at the same time: such is the multifarious capacity of the human imagination. A similar point can be made about the reader gripped by a whodunit novel. It is not a condition of their engagement with the story that they believe it to be a documentary work about a true crime, involving real people; they need only hesitate about who has committed the crime within fictive world of the story.

[4] Coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, relating his discussions with Wordsworth about Coleridge's intention to write supernatural characters and 'procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith' (Coleridge, 1817: 239).

[5] Literally 'lifeworld' — an individual's perception of the world as experienced in everyday life.

However, Lem's argument about the inscrutability of reader-response stands. It is unwise of Todorov to base a genre definition — the inherent agenda of which is to precisely delineate different modes of story — on something so nebulous as a reader-response obligated by a text. In practice, a character's hesitation, or adaptation, might well serve as a proxy for the reader's own response — and this has been a useful way to think about my own approach to writing Artifice stories — but no specific reader-response can be confidently presumed.

Moreover, if I were to allow that engendering a reader-response of adaptation qualifies a story as Artifice, one could plead for the inclusion of most SF and high-fantasy stories; after all, the reader must adapt to the marvellous worlds of such stories, pre-existing and entered by the reader *in media res*, regardless of the adaptation of characters.

Accordingly, I've chosen to dispense with the notion of reader adaptation as a condition of the Artifice story, and will instead concentrate on what's discernable on the page, which has led me to propose the third criteria for the Artifice story: 'That one or more characters must be seen to adapt to the impossible event — that is, to accept its actuality.'[6] Todorov's second condition for the Fantastic story states that:

> This hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to the character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work — in the case of naïve reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character.
>
> Todorov, [1973] 1975: 33

Notwithstanding prior reservations about reader-reaction being a *definitional* pre-condition of the Fantastic, Todorov's claim that the hesitation of characters could provide a mechanism for engendering hesitation in a reader about whether, within the world of the story, the supernatural data is real or not, seems plausible.

This being the case, I propose that in the Artifice story, the adaptation of characters might herald the adaptation of the reader. For example, in 'The Metamorphosis', the reactions of Gregor Samsa's family confirm his physical

[6] One might argue, on a case-to-case basis, over ambiguities around whether a character is indeed seen to be adapting, and what might qualify as 'accepting its actuality', but this is at least within the scope of ordinary textual analysis, and therefore a more hospitable environment for consensus to flourish.

transformation into a bug within the world of the story. We cannot know whether, in the face of this confirmatory information, any given reader is hedged towards accepting that Gregor's metamorphosis is physical rather than a delusion, but we can agree that this interpretation of the story is more available to a reader in the light of this information.

Who is Doing the Hesitating, or the Adapting?

If we take a character-response of adaptation as a given in any Artifice story (for the definitional reasons argued above), and look at the various roles in a story, including the protagonist, and a wider cast of characters within the fictive world — and whether or not they adapt, we can begin to map some kinds of Artifice stories that exist, or that might potentially be written, according to which characters are doing the adapting.

One Characters Adapts

Jorge Luis Borges' 'The Secret Miracle' (Borges, [1965] 1998: 130-137) tells the story, via extra-diagetic third-person narration, of the Jewish translator and poet Jaromir Hladík, who is arrested in Prague by the occupying Nazis and faces execution by firing squad. As the date of execution nears, Hladík occupies his time by attempting to complete, by rote, the composition of a verse drama entitled *The Enemies*. On the eve of the appointed day, he prays that God will grant him another year of life to complete the work. He is led out to face the firing squad, and just before the moment of death, time stops. The firing squad is frozen, immobile and so is Hladík, except for the ability to think and remember. Even after a day passes, 'the drop of water still clung to his cheek, the shadow of the bee still did not shift in the courtyard, the smoke from the cigarette he had thrown away did not blow away' (Borges, [1965] 1998: 136). And so Hladík is granted the time to complete *The Enemies*:

> He disposed of no document but his own memory; the mastering of each hexameter as he added it, had imposed upon him a kind of fortunate discipline not imagined by those amateurs who forget their vague, ephemeral paragraphs. He did not work for posterity, nor for God, of whose literary preferences he possessed scant knowledge.

Hladík completes his composition as a year passes, whereupon the firing squad unfreeze and he is shot dead.

The story is told in third-person extradiegis, focalized[7] from Hladík's point of view. No one else in the story, beyond the narrator, experiences the supernatural occurrence: we are to understand that after a year has passed, when the firing squad eventually fire their rifles, they are unaware that time paused for Hladík (and according to their own experience, we are given to understand, time did not pause). The duality of experience allows for the possibility that, at the moment of death Hladík enters a kind of hyper-sensitivity of thought, which he experiences as a year.

The American writer Tobias Wolf uses a similar conceit in his Artifice short story 'A Bullet in the Brain' (Wolf, 1995), in which a man is shot dead during a bank robbery, and at the moment the fatal bullet enters his brain he recalls an impossibly long sequence of memories. Likewise, Polish author Paweł Huelle's story 'Ukiel' (Huelle, 2012: 177-198) features extended vision at the point of death. It concerns an aging widower, Joachim, who returns to his native Poland where he encounters a spectral figure skating on a frozen lake. The figure has materialised from a picture that Joachim and his late wife Julia once viewed in the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh: 'The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Dunningston Loch', by Sir Henry Raeburn. Upon following the figure across the lake, Joachim is reunited with his wife. She explains: 'There's a special point, she said, putting on the glove, where all the laws of physics are broken. The crooked lines of time run together' (Huelle, 2012: 197). The story permits ambiguity about whether Julia — and her explanation of what's happening — are actually present in the scene, or have been conjured in Joachim's mind as a long and vivid hallucination at the moment he freezes to death on the lake. Borges himself may well have adapted the idea of protracting the moment of death to supernatural proportions from Ambrose Bierce's 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek' (Bierce, [1890] 2000: 305-313), which concerns an American civil war-era protagonist's fantasy of escape at the moment of his execution. Borges was certainly an admirer of Bierce, anthologising him in the *Book of Fantasy* (Borges, Ocampo & Casares, [1940]: 48-49).

[7] Following the use of the term by Genette (1972; 189-190) and Rimmon-Kenan (2002: 74).

The idea emerges in my story ‘Green Boots Cave’, wherein the mountaineer David Sharp dream’s the reader’s entire life before he dies. Likewise, my story ‘Absent’ features a character who is abstracted from his real-world surroundings. In this story, the supernatural event — that of the protagonist being literally ‘knocked out’ of his own body — is only experienced as a supernatural phenomenon by the protagonist himself. To his wife, colleagues, and doctors, he is suffering from a mysterious medical condition: ‘I know it helps to give it a name, a label, says the consultant, but sometimes we can’t. Sometimes we have to hold up our hands and say we don’t know’ (Hinks, 2019). My intention here was to foreclose an allegorical reading that his absence from his own body is intended to symbolise dementia. I also felt it important to frame the diagnosis as something unexceptional and quotidian (‘sometimes’ implying that the consultant often encounters mysterious illnesses without a straightforward diagnosis). I did not want the story to become about a global media reaction to a supernatural phenomenon, which would shift the emphasis away from the narrator’s interior experience.

More than One Character Adapts, but Society Does Not Adapt

Many Artifice stories depict adaptation occurring to a restricted group of characters, while the supernatural phenomenon is not exposed to, or acknowledged by, wider society. Argentinian writer Samantha Schwarblin’s story ‘Headlights’ (Schwarblin, 2019: 1-13) follows the young newlywed Felicity, whose husband has just driven away and abandoned her at a roadside bathroom. In the fields behind the road live a community of likewise abandoned women of various ages, who bicker and attempt to escape the field by hijacking the succession of cars, also occupied by newlyweds, which stop so the bride can use the bathroom. Each time, the groom drives away, abandoning the bride. Eventually, Felicity and two other women, Nene and Grandmother, hi-jack a car, at which point the grooms return along the road.

All the characters depicted within the story are privy to the supernatural element — a society of women wearing wedding dresses living perpetually in a field, without sustenance, and a cavalcade of bridegrooms roaming the highway — and yet the story implies the prevailing existence of a normative world beyond the gaze of the story, from which Felicity came; a society which is ignorant of the field of brides and the cavalcade of grooms (otherwise, where did Felicity come from, and why would

she stop to use this bathroom, knowing her fate?). As such, the story — with allegorical intent, perhaps — draws a ring around a group of characters, who are not entirely absent from the normative world, but for whom the rules of the normative world have been suspended.

Other Artifice stories feature a cast of characters who keep a supernatural phenomenon secret from the wider world. Iraqi author Hassan Blasim's story 'A Thousand and One Knives', depicts a group of post-occupation Baghdadis who discover they have the telekinetic power to make knives disappear. At first, the power is closely-guarded: 'we were wary of talking about the group to outsiders' (Blasim, 2013: 131), but eventually, the secret is leaked beyond the group, as one member, Allawi, 'moved out of the capital and wandered around the towns of the south. He toured the markets showing off his skill at making knives disappear, but earned a pittance' (Blasim, 2013: 134). Wider society doesn't pay attention to the supernatural event, diverted as it is by daily sectarian violence: there is, in post-occupation Baghdad, no normative world. The knife trick is apiece with everyday terror, which already appears phantasmagorical to Iraqi citizens.

Mayflies includes a trilogy of stories with the same opening, which over a few pages depicts the ghost of an old lady appearing to a family in a suburban house. From there, each story takes a different course: Ghost Story #1 depicts hesitation, as the main protagonist, Louise, begins to doubt the event ever happened. 'Ghost Story #3' depicts the haunting as a verified global phenomenon, while 'Ghost Story #2' is an experiment in writing a story in which a small group of characters experience a supernatural event, adapt to it, and keep it a secret. Having witnessed the recurring appearance of a ghost, the parents decide to keep the information within the bounds of the family:

> After this, Louise discussed with Carl the idea of arranging some kind of counselling for the children. But what could a counsellor conclude, except that here were two young children caught up in a delusion choreographed by their parents? How cruel it would be to make them question their own sanity. And so they urged the children not to speak of it beyond the walls of the house, in case people thought they were fibbing. For their part, the children, who were becoming attuned to their social standing at school, were disinclined to invite ridicule upon themselves and promised never to mention it to anyone.

I find this device — the secret, shared within a small group of characters — to be a useful way to handle adaptation to the supernatural event, as it corroborates that the event has indeed occurred within the story-world, without necessitating discussion about a global societal reaction. If only one person is exposed to the supernatural event, it lacks corroboration, which may invite hesitation and casts the story into the realm of the Fantastic (cf 'Ghost Story #1'). If wider society is exposed the supernatural event, the story is obliged to acknowledge a societal reaction to the supernatural, including — when the story has a contemporaneous setting, that of global media (cf 'Ghost Story #3'). As discussed below, this beckons the story down a rather narrow path of extrapolation.

In some Artifice stories, the time-frame of the narrative covers the discovery of the supernatural phenomenon and no more, which provides the author with a pretext for limiting the spread of information to a small cast of characters, without disclosure to wider society. Adam Marek's 'The Thorn' (Marek, 2007: 119-126), depicts a child named Wellie who is helping his grandparents in the garden when he discovers a thorn in his foot. They attempt to help him pull it out, first with tweezers, then pliers, whereupon it becomes evident that the thorn is a kitchen fork. At this point, the story becomes supernatural — it's not possible a small child could have a whole fork in his foot — and this would presumably be a newsworthy event. But we do not see the news leak into the wider world. The story ends shortly after the fork is removed. Other Marek stories, including 'The Stone Thrower' (Marek, 2012: 43-51), which I'll discuss at length in later chapters, similarly end the narrative just after the fantastic incident has occurred, without inviting questions about whether, and how, the news will leak into wider society.

Society Adapts

Some Artifice stories feature supernatural phenomena experienced on a global scale. Julia Armfield's 'The Great Awake' (Armfield, 2019: 19-42) posits that everyone's sleeping persona suddenly manifests as a living being — like a ghost — each with its own characteristics. Armfield uses the societal reaction, and in particular the media reaction, to define the phenomenon:

> By August, the newspapers were labelling it *The Great Awake*, printing graphs and pie-charts and columns by confused academics. […] Ultimately, there was found to be little concrete evidence to support any one cause — it wasn't more likely to happen if you ate meat or drank coffee or had extra-marital sex. It wasn't a virus or a medical syndrome, it nothing to do with drinking water or women being on the pill.
>
> Armfield, 2019: 21

For Armfield, referencing the media debate in this way provides an opportunity to foreclose ideas the reader might have about what kind of phenomenon this is. However, once media debate has been introduced into the narrative, the story is obliged to sustain parallel threads: one about the protagonist and her social milieu, and one about the global conversation about the phenomenon.

Adam Marek's 'A Bellyful of Rain' (Marek, 2007: 11-31) is about a woman who becomes pregnant with thirty-seven babies. Spreading the news of the phenomenon to wider society becomes an intrinsic part of the plot, as the couple raise funds for medical procedures:

> 'The TV networks will fight to get hold of this story. They'll bid each other so high that all your expenses here will be covered, and you'll make enough on top to ensure that you and Brendan won't need to work ever again.'
>
> Brendan pictured himself living a life of leisure, but in a room with terry towelling hanging down from the ceiling like vines.
>
> Marek, 2007: 18

However, as the narrative unfolds, the story doesn't reveal the nature of the media conversation about the event. Television crews visit the couple, but we are not privy to the effect the news has once it's abroad in the world; Marek gestures towards the notion of a global conversation, without being drawn into explicitly depicting it.

Carol Shields' story 'Weather' (Shields, 2000: 28-36) — in which the weather is suspended for the duration of a meteorologist's strike — similarly alludes to the media coverage, but minimises its impingement onto the page, as the global conversation is alluded to, but not depicted in any detail: 'Deadlocked, they said on the eleven o'clock news; the two sides still miles apart. A neighbour — he owns one

of those satellite dishes and is therefore able to tune in to five hundred news sources — told us the government was thinking of calling in the troops. What good would that do? I thought' (Shields, 2000: 32).

I attempt something similar in my story 'Pyramids', which posits that the last feeling everyone has is experienced perpetually. While the story focuses on the effect of this news on a nuclear family, I make passing reference to the wider societal ramifications of the situation: 'The father watches the news on the sofa. The suicide cults, the start-up ventures, the economy, interviews with experts' (Hinks, 2019).

It seems plausible to me that a society faced with the phenomenon might consider that elective suicide — within a controlled environment that guarantees a positive final feeling before death — would be a reasonable solution, in which case, new ventures would emerge to facilitate mass suicide. It also seems plausible this would have an impact on the economy. But I was reluctant to explicitly pursue these ideas any further within the story, lest I raised questions I couldn't answer: what are the legal impediments to this, and how would they be overcome? What specifically is the effect on the economy? The more a story delves into these issues, the greater its obligation to provide answers, lest it seem incoherent, whereupon the reader will be unable to quell their objections. But in providing answers, the story must switch its focus to the macro effects on society, and away from the fortunes of the central cast of characters.

Managing the Scope of Artifice Stories

These examples highlight a perennial problem for the author of Artifice stories: when an Artifice story describes a supernatural phenomenon that society (as depicted within the story-world) is presumed to be aware of, it seems remiss not to mention the public discourse this would provoke, and furthermore how this discourse would influence the way the characters in the story think about the situation. For stories set in the present day, this might entail what the media commentariat are saying, reaction on social media, even the memes being shared. Depicting all this in a plausible and coherent manner leaves the writer with a lot of world-building to do, and there are, in my view, sound practical reasons to avoid it:

1) Predictability. For the media response to seem plausible, it must be, to a large degree, predicable — i.e. fall within the parameters of what the reader might

reasonably expect; otherwise, the author of the Artifice story must follow one implausible event (the supernatural) with another (an incoherent media reaction), which risks disrupting the reader's suspension of disbelief. As such, these sections of the story can hold few surprises for the reader, concerned as they are with the confirmation of expectations, rather than introducing further intrigue. In my view, this is likely to make for less compelling reading.

2) Unhelpful satirical resonances. Several of my own Artifice stories make passing reference to a global media reaction, notably 'Pyramids', 'Ghost Story #3' and 'What Happened'. In early drafts of these stories, my instinct was to riff on the societal or political implications. For example, earlier versions of 'Ghost Story #3' featured self-proclaimed paranormal experts and religious leaders appearing on television to debate the significance of the ghost (much like the depiction of the media reaction in Armfield's story). But this imbued the story with satirical resonances that were unhelpful, undermining it as a fictive entity in much the same way that metaphorical resonance can. It is not my intention that the reader will view the ghost as merely a pretext for satirical asides on politics, religion or the media.

3) Disrupting the suspension of disbelief. As a story explicates the wider societal response to the supernatural, it risks raising more objections in the mind of the reader, which must then be mitigated. For example, the global conversation around the phenomenon in 'Pyramids' would inevitably touch upon the specific nature of the scientific discovery that led to the revelation, which would necessitate further exposition. I prefer not to invite that line of thinking.

4) Repetition from story to story. Much of the media reaction one might describe in relation to supernatural events will be essentially similar, regardless of the specific nature of the supernatural phenomenon, especially if the story has a contemporaneous setting. By which I mean that, regardless of whether a ghost simultaneously appears all around the world ('Ghost Story #3'), or scientists believe we carry our last feeling into the afterlife ('Pyramids'), or people experience a lemming-like suicidal impulse ('What Happened'), the format of the media response is likely to be within predictable parameters: breaking news bulletins, initial social media reaction, nominated experts debating the significance and solution, social media hot-takes and memes, newspaper op-eds. It would take some fortitude for a reader to make it though a whole collection of stories that repeats this cycle.

Through my own Practice as Research, I have developed a number of responses to the problem of whether — and how — to represent societal and media reaction:

i) Do not make the supernatural event a global phenomenon. For example, limit the adapting characters to either a single protagonist (e.g. 'Absent') or a small cast of characters (e.g. 'Ghost Story #2', 'Green Boots' Cave') and use other devices to corroborate the supernatural phenomenon.

ii) Do not set the story in the present day, but in an era before mass communications when news travels slowly (e.g. 'Plinth').

iii) Gesture to wider societal reaction, but don't elaborate (e.g. 'Pyramids', 'What Happened', 'Ghost Story #3'). In these stories, I make passing reference to media reaction; hopefully just enough to give reader the confidence that I've considered this implication, but they needn't worry about it any further.

iv) Allow for the possibility of a global reaction, but don't explicitly refer to it. For example, a reader of my story 'Smoking' might conjecture that the phenomenon would attract news media attention, and that video footage of it would go viral on social media, and so forth. However, the story doesn't mention any of this, and it's my hope that it progresses to its conclusion without the reader extrapolating in this way. If this sounds too simplistic to be plausible, it's worth noting that, despite 'The Metamorphosis' being set in an age of mass communication (certainly in terms of newspapers, telegram, and so on), and despite characters outside the family unit being exposed to the supernatural event (Gregor's colleagues, the maid), his metamorphosis into a bug is not treated as an event of global import: no news reporters visit the Samsa family. As Henry James says, in his 'Preface to Roderick Hudson': 'Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so' (James, [1905] 2012: vii).[8]

[8] I first became aware of this quote in a 2007 *Guardian* article by Richard Ford [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/03/featuresreviews.guardianreview1], and have myself previously quoted it in my foreword to the anthology *Brace: A New Generation in Short Fiction* (Hinks, 2008).

Outliers

Some Artifice stories feature the adaptation of a single character, a group of characters, the wider society of the story-world, or a combination of these actors at different junctures within the story.

David Constantine's 'The Loss' (Constantine, 2015: 59-67) presents a single character adapting to supernatural data: the protagonist, Mr Silverman, feels his soul leaving his body, to begin its journey to the ninth circle of hell. This story could be considered Fantastic — engendering hesitation — but for the fact that the supernatural event is corroborated to Mr Silverman towards the end of the story (64-67) by two other characters — Dr Blench, and Sam — who are experiencing the same phenomenon.

In Adam Marek's 'Testicular Cancer vs. the Behemoth' (Marek, 2007: 45-58), societal adaptation prefigures the adaptation of the protagonist. The hero, Austen, receives a terminal diagnosis in the doctor's surgery, while simultaneously outside, a Godzilla-like creature has emerged from the ocean and begins destroying the city. Austen is so dazed by the diagnosis that his adaption to the supernatural event is latent; he wanders the streets while all around him, people flee in panic. (45-49). As discussed in the next chapter, Marek often places his protagonists in immediate physical jeopardy, to facilitate their adaptation to a supernatural event.

A notable example of a story featuring multiple levels of adaptation and hesitation is Borges' 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (Borges, [1965] 1998: 17-34). The story is so complex and multi-layered that attempts at précis are futile; suffice to say it features Borges himself (or rather, a fictionalised version of Borges) as the main protagonist, and purports to relate an incident in which his friend, Bioy Casares, shares his discovery of a heretofore unknown Asian country and culture named Uqbar, which is referred to in only one edition of the *Anglo-American Cyclopedia*, but remains otherwise undocumented. Uqbar is, upon investigation, a hoax concocted by a group of literary scholars. This news, however, merely prefigures Borges' discovery of an entire encyclopaedia devoted to a planet called Tlön:

> Now I had in my hands a substantial fragment of the complete history of an unknown planet, with its architecture and its playing cards, its mythological terrors and the sound of its dialects, its emperors and its oceans, its minerals, its

> birds, and its fishes, its algebra and its fire, its theological and its metaphysical arguments, all clearly stated, coherent, without any apparent dogmatic intention or parodic undertone.
>
> Borges, [1965] 1998: 21

Tlön, it transpires, is also a collaborative work of forgery, assembled over many generations by 'a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, mathematicians, moralists, painters and geometricians' (Borges, [1965] 1998: 22). However, as the story progresses, the reader is offered hints that Tlön might exist in actuality (at least, within the actuality of the story-world). Borges cites a parable of lost coins (the parable itself is claimed to be a Tlön idiom), which are then discovered by their owner. The coins did not cease to exist when they were lost: 'It is logical to assume that they have existed, albeit in some secret way, in a manner whose understanding is concealed from men' (Borges, [1965] 1998: 26). The implication being that Tlön has been concealed, within the story-world, awaiting revelation. This outcome is confirmed towards the end of the story, as the world adopts Tlön's languages, culture, philosophy and literary history; our planet transfigures into Tlön.

Considering character reaction to the supernatural within this story: first Casares, then Borges too, hesitate at the possibility of a supernatural occurrence (the existence of a secret country, Uqbar), which transpires to be a hoax. Upon discovering Tlön, Borges hesitates, presuming it to be another hoax, but it transpires to be a supernatural occurrence, insofar as Tlön is conceived in such detail that it is wished into existence. Borges (here I refer to the protagonist and narrator) reflects that: 'English, French and mere Spanish will disappear from this planet. The world will be Tlön. I take no notice' (Borges, [1965] 1998: 33). And so he finally concedes his adaptation, though he wants no part of this new world. Concurrently, wider society adapts, as the world embraces the language and culture of Tlön. Running parallel to these processes of hesitation and adaptation, there also exists within the *fabula* of the story the secret society who imagine and scribe Tlön into existence. The designation of their role as adaptative or hesitative depends on whether the reader judges them to be able to foresee the outcome of their actions.

Must Anyone Adapt?

Before moving on, it's worth noting that Todorov's first rule insists that the Fantastic story must 'oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as *a world of living persons*' [my emphasis] (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 33). But does a Fantastic story need to feature living persons? Might one write a Fantastic story, or indeed an Artifice story, in which there are no sentient characters at all?

As a thought experiment, I propose a story told in heterodiegetic, extradiegetic, omniscient third-person present tense, set in a barren desert. One moment a monolith appears, the narrator tells us. This is unobserved in the world of the story; there are no 'living persons' on the page to observe it. The next moment it is gone. The supposed agency behind this event is unstated. This could plausibly engender hesitation in the reader: *Will it transpire that this is supposed to be a supernatural event? Or will there be a natural explanation?* Or it could engender adaptation: *The world described in this story has different rules to the world I know.* Similarly, Ray Bradbury's SF story 'There Will Come Soft Rains' (Bradbury, 1950: 220-228) features no living people 'on the page'. It concerns the artificial intelligence system of a house, speaking to the absent householder, in the wake of nuclear Armageddon.[9]

Are such stories really devoid of living persons? Genette (1972: 189-190) distinguishes three modes of alignment between the narrator and the character within a text (citing Todorov's influence): 1) Narrator > Character: the narrator knows more than the character; 2) Narrator = Character: the narrator has no more or less knowledge than the character, and; 3) Narrator < Character: the narrator knows less than the character (this mode of narration typically being concerned with externalised action and speech). Genette calls this relationship between the narrator and character 'focalization' (Genette: ibid). The character and the narrator — or to use Rimmon-Kenan's terms, the 'person and the narrative agent' (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: 73) — can be, but are not always, one and the same entity; for example, the narrator may variously adopt the vocabulary and perspective of one or more character.

In the absence of human characters on the page, the narrator remains a de-facto character, entangled with the events being related. As Richard Walsh says, 'The

[9] As the impossible data (the AI system) pre-exists within the *fabula* of this story, there is no adaptation, and so I would designate this as a Marvellous SF story, not Fantastic or Artifice.

ubiquity of the narrator is a fundamental assumption for Genette' (Walsh, 1997: 1). The focalization — seeing things in the story-world and relating them to the reader — automatically unifies character with narrator, and even a heterodiegetic narrator must have some connection to the events of the story, as their interlocutor. If the narrator 'just knows' what happened because they are omniscient, this omniscience surely also counts as presence within the fictive world of the story. In all explanations, the notion of heterodiegetic extradiegesis, independent of the story-world, must collapse. Even a story narrated in the future-tense must have a narrator (who may or may not also represent the implied author in the mind of the reader), whose character is continually under revision according to the decisions they make in telling the story, and the way the reader interprets those decisions. So all stories must be inhabited by a narrator with attributes of sentience — be it a human, god, ghost or robot.

3. Adaptation, Speed and Misdirection

In discussing the process of adaptation engendered by 'The Metamorphosis', Todorov notes that, 'succinct indications of hesitation are drowned in the movement of the narrative' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 169). The story refutes hesitation about the unreal event, in favour of a fictive universe with its own rules. As Edward Said reflected, the scenario proposed in 'The Metamorphosis' 'has no object but its own constant clarification' (Said, [1968] 1988: 49).

Writers of Artifice stories are faced with the challenge of how to introduce the supernatural data, and how to proceed with this 'constant clarification'. In my own Practice as Research, I've explored a number of different methods (often in combination) of getting the protagonist, characters — and by extension, the reader — past an initial moment of hesitation, which I'll discuss in this chapter with reference to exemplary stories and to my own work. These methods fall into six categories:

Six Approaches to Introducing a Supernatural Event

In Media Res

'The Metamorphosis' opens *in media res*[10], insofar as the *fabula* of the story — with its impossible transformation — has begun by the time the narration (the *syuzhet*) begins. 'As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect' (Kafka [1915] 2007: 89). This dispenses with the need to describe a physical transformation from man to insect. The story is related in the third person, focalized through Gregor's perspective. Kafka quickly closes the door on readings that might beget hesitation. 'It was no dream' we are told, several sentences on, lest we suspect that we are still within the realm of sleep. (89).

Over the next few pages, the possibilities and limitations of this fictive world are further explored and defined, by Gregor and — by proxy — the reader. Gregor can speak, though his voice is changed. He can do all the things an insect can do: climb walls, scuttle about. He also has the limitations of an insect: difficulty in turning over from his back, a tenderness of the belly, and a changed appetite. Once

[10] A clarification on my use of the term *in media res* (literally 'into the middle of things'): I use the term following Horace, its originator: the central action has already commenced at the beginning of the narrative; the opposite of *ab ovo* –from the egg. For further clarification, see https://www.britannica.com/art/in-medias-res-literature Accessed 09/01/2020.

established, these rules are not transgressed for the duration of the story. Eleven pages in, any lingering doubts are removed by the opening of the door to his room, whereupon the clerk and his family corroborate the transformation. This approach — of teaching the reader the rules — is discussed by Adam Marek, with reference to the way his own stories fuse fantasy and reality:

> Within the first sentence or two, you have to teach your reader how to read the rest of it [the story]. You show them how much you expect them to suspend their disbelief in the first paragraph. […] You create a set of rules for yourself, and those rules can apply to a world that's very different to our own, but you have to stick to them.
>
> Marek, interviewed by Hinks, 2011

Marek's own story 'The Stone Thrower' exemplifies this technique. The premise is that a small boy is throwing stones an impossibly long way across a lake; the stones are decapitating chickens in the yard of the holiday home where Hal, the protagonist, is staying with his wife and children. Similarly, the story begins *in media res*; the *fabula* (the boy throwing stones) has already commenced prior to the opening sentence (the *syuzhet*):

> Hal was awakened by a brief expletive from one of the chickens outside. And then there was another, coupled with a dull thud. Out of bed, Hal stuck his head into the hoverfly graveyard between netting and pane to see that in the enclosure directly below the window, two of the chickens were dead. […] Hal followed the line of trajectory back, all the way across to the other side of the lake, where there was a person, a male, young. His white t-shirt was vivid against the dark wall of conifers behind as he curled his arm, winding himself up onto his back foot. He uncoiled with a co-ordinated swish that took in the whole of his body, terminating at his fingertips. The pebble he threw only became visible at the top of its arc, as it rounded against the brightening sky. Its descent was invisible, until it flared into being again, upon the head of chicken number four.
>
> Marek, 2012: 43

Marek quickly establishes the 'rules' of the story. We learn there were ten chickens in the yard. Four have already been killed by the stone thrower. The story, then, becomes a countdown to the death of all ten chickens, which sets the reader's expectations about the story's length and scope. This accords with editor Ra Page's assertion that 'Brevity cannot be a mere whim or accident of composition, it must be inherent in the first idea, like a radioactive half-life, making any extension of the material or lengthening of the plot impossible without destroying the story' (Page, 2006: iv).

At no point does Marek's narrator pause to reflect on the plausibility of the stone thrower; there's no time. The *fabula* covers only a few minutes, from the first stone to the last, and for the duration Hal is immediately concerned with trying to protect his family and the chickens.

This is markedly different from the approach of Borges, for example, who often withholds the Artifice element until far later in the story, after a preamble about the backgrounds of the principal characters and the thematic concerns of the story, which are often introduced in the form of a literary puzzle. 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' and 'The Secret Miracle' (discussed above) both fit this mould, as does Borges' final published story 'Shakespeare's Memory' (Borges, 2001: 122-131), in which the supernatural event is introduced about half way through.

My own story 'Pyramids' opens *in media res,* with the Artifice element already underway, insofar as the *syuzhet* of story begins with the parents explaining to their child a phenomenon that has, within the *fabula*, already been discovered — that when you die, the last feeling you have is experienced in perpetuity. On the first page, the parents join the girl at the table where she's colouring in. After a couple of paragraphs, they begin to break the news to her:

> 'Baby Bear, do you remember we talked about what happens when we die?' says the father. 'That we go to heaven? Remember what we said about Granny? […] Okay, well the thing is, that was because we didn't really know what happens. But now we do. Scientists have found out, and they've told the government, and the government told all the mummies and daddies…'
>
> Hinks, 2019.

In ‘Pyramids’, I follow Marek’s rubric that the writer of Artifice fiction must ‘teach the reader how to read the rest of the story’. The child is, in effect, a proxy for the reader, as the implications of the discovery are explained to her by the parents:

> She looks up at him with a hostile expression. ‘But bodies get eaten by worms when you put them in the ground. How can they be sad after they’ve got eaten?’
>
> ‘It’s very grown up of you to know that, Baby Bear,’ says the father, ‘But that’s not what this is about. It’s more like…’ He looks around.
>
> ‘When you die,’ say the mother, leaning forward, ‘the last bit of feeling you have seems to go on forever, to you.’
>
> Hinks, 2019

In considering my approach to writing the openings of Artifice stories, I’ve found it useful to borrow the principles of user-experience (UX) design in software engineering. ‘Onboarding’, in a UX context, means walking the user through key features of an application on first use, demonstrating a range of functionality she might otherwise be unaware of. ‘Contextual learning’, on the other hand, alerts a user to functionality as-and-when it’s relevant to what she’s doing (Griffiths, 2015: 7). Applied to a short story, ‘onboarding’ means methodically teaching the reader the rules before the main part of the story gets going, and is analogous to the ‘world-building’ that can encumber a story (and is noted as an issue in some SF): as M John Harrison puts it, world-building, ‘believes that it has to do everything around here if anything is going to get done’ (Harrison).

Conversely, a short story without onboarding but with ‘contextual learning’ gets straight to the main part of the story and defines the physical limitations of the fictive world only when the protagonist meets them. Google’s best-practice edicts for app design advise that a separate onboarding sequence ‘should only be employed if it is essential and contextual tips / help are insufficient. If used, it should only surface the highest priority learnings a user will need for first use’ (Griffiths, 2015: 7). Otherwise, onboarding can result in a high ‘bounce rate’ (Griffiths, 2015: 11), as users become frustrated or bored and exit the app.

In this respect, this opening passage of ‘Pyramids’ reflects a ‘contextual learning’ model, rather than an ‘onboarding’ model: the implications of the discovery

are revealed only as they pertain to protecting the little girl, and the broader societal changes — such as suicide cults and civil disruption — are alluded to in later passages. Early drafts of the story only featured the passage with the girl and her parents, and I felt that (as discussed above), I should at least allude to the wider societal implications of the discovery. In addition to the passage where the father watches TV — which introduces the media conversation — I added an older son, who along with his friends have adapted to the new reality by using his mood-pen for kicks. I also added a closing passage in which the parents consider smothering the little girl, which I fear tends towards melodrama, but may be a coherent reaction within the reality depicted by the story.

Misdirection through Jeopardy

Marek's stories 'Testicular Cancer vs The Behemoth' (Marek, 2007: 45-58) and 'The Stone Thrower' (Marek, 2012: 43-51) both place the protagonist in immediate jeopardy, which diverts the attention (of protagonist and, perhaps, of reader) from the ramifications of the supernatural event. Both stories employ an extradiegetic narration, focalizing on the protagonists' perception of the events. Upon receiving his fatal diagnosis, Austen, the hero of 'Testicular Cancer vs The Behmoth' crosses a city being destroyed by a Godzilla-like creature, which has emerged from the sea. While the reader is made aware that he's facing immediate danger, Austen is portrayed as preoccupied with his diagnosis, and the pain in his testicles: 'He was half-aware of people running past him, of screams and exclamations. Two cars collided, and then a third drove into them, but Austen hardly noticed' (Marek, 2007: 46). The jeopardy posed to Austen by his illness provides a plausible justification for him not hesitating in the face of the supernatural element — the monster. As the story continues, the monster eventually releases him from his personal peril:

> Austen's muscles twitched with excitement. His balls, which had been like infected melons, shrank down to peas. In the light of the monster they were almost insignificant. Thanks to the monster, he stopped dying for a second.
>
> Marek, 2007: 51

My own story ‘Plinth’ uses a similar technique. The story is narrated in the extradiegetic second-person, closely focalized. It opens as the protagonist awakens to find himself balancing on top of a tall plinth. The situation demands that, before he begins asking questions about his situation, he must concentrate on saving himself:

> A step to either side, or forwards or backwards, and you’ll be off it, falling through the cloud. Perhaps there will be a bank of soft grass or heather to cushion your fall. But leaning over a little, you can see only mist, so you concentrate on keeping your balance.
>
> Hinks: 2019

Hesitation about the implausibility of the situation is deferred — at least within the focalized view-point of the protagonist — until the immediate jeopardy subsides. The protagonist has also sustained a head injury (I mean to imply that he has been trepanned, as have the people standing on the other plinths) and has no recollection of events before he came to consciousness. This allows a certain degree of equivalence with the reader: like them, he has no prior knowledge of the situation, and he explores his surroundings as their proxy; the extradiegetic second-person enforces this notion.

Over the course of five pages, the protagonist beings to feel more comfortable standing on the plinth: ‘At least you have more confidence in your balance now. Perhaps it is like being on a ship at sea, you think — you get your legs after a time’. The danger of falling off the plinth is now superseded by other jeopardy, primarily his thirst and hunger. As he goes about solving this problem, I establish further elements of intrigue, including the revelation of the other three plinths. It’s my intention that throughout the story, as one threat dissipates, another replaces it, and as one mystery is solved, a further mystery is revealed, drawing the reader through the story. A degree of physical jeopardy and intrigue is sustained throughout, because even when the protagonist climbs down the ladder, an uncertain fate awaits him.

Misdirection through Psychological Realism

As the moral philosopher Tamar Szabó Gendler notes in ‘The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance’ (Gendler, 2000: 55-81), storytelling relies on a degree of alignment between the assumptions of the writer and the reader:

> […] storytelling makes use of standard assumptions about common knowledge and presupposition. The narrator needs to assume that the listener shares a wide range of background beliefs about the world, and the listener needs to assume that the narrator assumes this, and so on, in familiar Gricean fashion.
>
> Gendler, 2000: 197

When writing 'realistic' stories, I'm able to call upon my own *Lebenswelt*[11] to imbue characters with nuanced reactions, reflections, emotional responses, etc., which I hope seem convincing and coherent to a reader, insofar as they resonate with the reactions, reflections, and emotional responses that I presume the reader to experience in everyday life; likewise I'm able to write passages of dialogue in which characters discuss 'realistic' events, by scavenging material I overhear from day to day. But this modus operandi is problematized when writing Artifice stories. My own *Lebenswelt* contains no supernatural experiences. For example, I can only imagine what it would be like to see — or think I have seen — a ghost, and how I would react. Similarly, I conjecture that most readers will not consider themselves to have witnessed a supernatural event, and this being the case, they will not be able to validate even the most carefully rendered character-reaction that I am able write[12]. Gendler's 'standard assumptions' shared between writer and reader are absent from the Artifice story, at least insofar as they pertain to character-reaction to the supernatural, which is, as Todorov ([1973] 1975) notes, its fundamental preoccupation.

If coherent character-reaction to supernatural data is absent from an Artifice story, characters may become flimsy avatars, or emblems; mere hostages to the plot events. Todorov: '[whereas] psychological narrative regards each action as a means of access to the personality in question […] a-psychological narrative, on the contrary, is characterised by intransitive actions: action is important in itself and not as an indication of this or that character trait' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 67). My story 'Тоска'

[11] 'lifeworld' — an individual's perception of the world as experienced in everyday life.

[12] I caveat this by admitting that the problem persists, albeit to a lesser degree, in the 'realistic' stories I write: the acts of ventriloquism I undertake to depict characters with different life experiences to mine are of course fallible (writing from a the perspective of a woman, or an older person, or someone from a different socio-economic or ethnic background, for example), as are any broad assumptions I might make about a postulated reader's background, life experiences, etc.

risks this. It is beyond my imaginative powers to predict how a young man would react upon discovering that there has been a conspiracy to persuade him that Big Ben exists, when it does not. Matty's response of indifference (or feigned indifference) is largely a product of my own inability to write a more coherent reaction, after many unsatisfactory attempts.

In most cases, my best recourse is to draw on my small trove of personal experience of trauma (bereavement, injury, shock at witnessing fatal accidents, etc.), as facsimiles for what a character might feel. For example, my description of the protagonist in 'Absent' who 'becomes aware that he's already begun taking giddy notes for when he will recount the experience to his wife' (Hinks, 2019) is drawn from my experience of breaking my leg after falling from a cliff: as I awaited rescue I caught myself formulating the events into an anecdote to tell to people.

The triviality of 'taking giddy notes' in the face of a potentially catastrophic medical emergency aims to persuade the reader of the psychological plausibility of the protagonist, while encouraging them to accept the supernatural event (even though the two things are not strictly causal): 'Absent' makes no attempt to explain *why* the protagonist has been knocked out of his body, but as I divert attention towards the odd reaction of the character, the reader is, I hope, misdirected. I use the same approach in 'Lightning', as Clive describes Sarah praying after baby Jemima has been struck by a bolt of lightning, which has come down the chimney:

> She said that she would always believe in Him from now on, if he'd save Jemima, and according to Clive he could still very much remember what Sarah's voice sounded like, which was not a scream or anything, but a sort of coquettish and maybe even sexual imploring voice, using all her charm on God almost.
>
> Hinks: 2019

The function of these passages is twofold: 1) to 'sell' the character as psychologically coherent; 2) in amplifying an unusual character response, to distract the reader from interrogating the implausibility of the impossible event itself.

The second paragraph of 'Absent' explores the physical situation the protagonist finds himself in, and establishes its limitations. His encounter, beneath the boughs of a horse chestnut tree, with a woman and her children, exists in the story to

show the reader that he can control his body remotely, and that other people can see his body, but that his sentient consciousness floats through the world invisibly. Subsequent passages, in which he returns home to his wife, explore the phenomenon further (he sees himself lying in bed, he feels his own dreams), and provide the domestic context from which he eventually escapes. These passages are essentially onboarding, and could, I suppose, result in a high 'bounce rate', as readers become bored or frustrated. Wary of this, I determinedly increase the pace towards the end of this sequence, as the protagonist returns to work, to give the reader a sense of acceleration through the story, conflating the occurrences of several days (or weeks) within the present-continuous tense:

> It takes some getting used to, accompanying himself through each day. They catch the train to work each morning and do their best between them to compose emails, fathom budgets, analyse spread-sheets, remain alert in meetings, then return home, sitting beside one another in the train carriage, or letting himself have the seat if there's only one free.
>
> Hinks: 2019

If 'Absent' uses onboarding, 'Green Boots' Cave' favours contextual learning. The story opens in conventional fashion, as the mountaineer David Sharp faces death near the summit of Mt Everest. The nature of the impossible event — and its parameters — are revealed only as they become pertinent to the story, whereupon they're explained to the reader as directly and succinctly as possible, switching to a second-person direct address:

> This is where you come in. As he freezes, David begins to dream, and he dreams that he is you. It's not like the dreams people have when asleep — those lurid, anxious, magic-lantern shows of things just out of reach. This is a vivid and complex dream of your whole life, in real-time, from your birth, right up until where you are now — whatever circumstances led to you read this story.
>
> Hinks: 2019

This conceit lets me abdicate the process of adaptation to the reader (at least until section 2, in which the 'I' narrator collapses at the party).

As I invite the reader to consider their life, I invoke snippets of memory/reflection which seem specific, but are in fact universal (at least, I propose, universal to the average Global North reader of literary fiction in the twenty-first century), and comparable with a spiritualist performer saying: 'I'm getting a J. Do we have a J in the audience?':

> The tiny worlds you made, playing on the floor as an infant. The first time you realised you were clever. When it felt as though the world was revealing its secrets to you. When the chasm between who you hoped to be and who you are began to open. The foolish things you said. When you lay awake trying to re-write them. When you told yourself "I will change" and did not change. When you looked in the mirror and thought 'you again'. The accommodations you've made with yourself. How you've kept going, and what it required of you. How boring it has been, and how quickly it has passed.
>
> Hinks: 2019

It's possible that a reader might not identify themself with the second-person 'you' of this address. They might conjure a postulated reader who is *not* them, or simply infer a description of me, the author. None of these readings undermine the story.

'What Happened' signals degrees in the process of adaptation (by the protagonist) through a return to a preoccupation with their own petty concerns. As Gregor in 'The Metamorphosis' soon begins to fret about his employer and his family, so the narrator of 'What Happened' concerns herself with extricating herself from an awkward relationship, using banal psycho-babble clichés. A cataclysmic event has occurred, causing the death of (presumably) thousands of people, and yet her response is vectored on herself: her annoyance at having to sit through an awkward meal with Glen, self-consciousness about other diners staring at his hands, and her self-justifications about dumping him. And yet, it's my hope that these are all plausible, understandable reactions that the reader might sympathise with.

Distancing by Limiting the Narrative Viewpoint

In her story 'Thus Were Their Faces', the Argentinian writer Silvina Ocampo distributes the manifestation of the impossible event between a cast of forty school children, who are each possessed by a singular vision, and gradually begin to act out the same behaviour. '[…] with the same sullen, withdrawn look on their faces, their minds, like little machines, were spinning the web of a single thought, a single desire, a single expectation' (Ocampo, [1961] 2015: 192). The reader is not privy to the children's thoughts; the nature of their shared vision is only gradually revealed through the cataloguing of its external symptoms:

> In arts class, the teacher wanted to stimulate the children's imagination and asked them to draw any object they felt moved to draw. Each child, for an alarmingly long time, drew wings, of various forms and dimensions, though the differences did not reduce what she termed the monotony of the whole.
>
> Ocampo, [1961] 2015: 195

The story gathers reports of the marvellous event from multiple sources and compiles them into a narrative sequence, with scant authorial reflection on their supposed felicity, besides the early assertion that 'one assumes, nevertheless, that it was a real event and not a fantasy' (Ocampo, [1961] 2015: 191).

The story uses an intradiegetic narrative viewpoint, often switching to the second-person plural to situate the narrator within the society of the story-world, and imply what Rimmon-Kenan calls 'homodiegetic' agency (2002: 96). However, the narrator does not operate as a tangible character as much as Greek chorus: an omniscient relator of events, whose stake in the outcome is limited to what feels like a manner of civic concern. This mode of narration is therefore 'intradiegetic-heterodiegetic' (ibid: 96).

I attempt something similar in my story 'Smoking'. Although the events are ostensibly related from a extradiagetic-heterodiegetic perspective, the narration assumes the experience of a direct witness to the events, and so aligns itself with the villagers in the audience in the community centre, while denying the reader access to the thoughts of performers at the centre of the mystery. This distancing not only obviates hesitation (we are not privy to the women's internal agonising over the

plausibility and cause of their shared power), but rather their very inscrutability becomes the focus of the story.

> […] there is something undeniably uncanny about watching magic performed by people you meet every day about your village: your child's schoolteacher, your GP, the check-out assistant at the farm shop, your postmistress, your pharmacist. And especially when they have claimed, in all the years they've been performing the trick, that it is not a trick (the sincerity and steadfastness of their claim, over the years, surpassing in impressiveness the trick itself) to the extent that they declare themselves upset by it, at this power bestowed upon them, and yet obliged to perform it, once a year, as though to prove to everyone not that they still hold this benign power, but that it still holds them.
>
> Hinks: 2019

My story 'The First Principle' takes extradiagetic-heterodiegetic narrative perspective to an extreme, describing the fates of civilisations housed within a series of computer-generated simulations, without depicting any of the individuals living within this universe, until the final paragraph when the macro-level distancing very quickly telescopes, whereupon the focus is directed towards the individual reader. As with 'Green Boots Cave', I switch to the second-person to emphasise that I wish the reader to consider him/herself in relation to the events of the story:

> […] the parent universe and its child simulations carried on without them, like ghost ships sailing through time. In each of these simulations our planet hangs uncontacted, with its rocks and seas, its plants and animals, and you, living and dying, all the time.
>
> Hinks, 2019

I'm fond of this technique — of switching into the second-person — because if used judiciously, it has the startling effect of suddenly implicating the reader within the diegesis, or obliging them to locate themselves in relation to the story, rather as an actor breaks the forth wall. NB. My stories 'Plinth' and 'Long Grey Sands' use the second-person voice for entirely different reasons: the register reinforces the reader's identification with the protagonist's peril, and aligns them with process of sensory

exploration; it invites the reader to feel the wind whipping against their face as they stand atop a plinth, or feel their feet sinking onto the sand as they attempt to run from an incoming tide.

Distancing through Narrative Voice

'What happened' also depicts a shared vision of a kind, as people across the nation simultaneously respond to a lemming-like instinct to hurl themselves onto railway tracks. The first-person narrator describes the marvellous event both in terms of her own immediate response (hesitation is deferred because she is in peril, like Hal in 'The Stone Thrower') but also reflects back on a wider societal reaction:

> So I was in this situation with no inkling that Glen himself was on a bridge in Salford with hundreds of other people. Almost in a queue is how it looks on the YouTube footage, or like troops waiting to go over the top in trench warfare, rows deep, only not over the top of a trench but over the railings of the bridge.
>
> Hinks, 2019

The narrator of 'What Happened' is intended to be an 'everywoman', who responds with the incredulity that a postulated reader might suppose they too would experience in this situation. In this respect, the protagonist-narrator serves as an intermediary between the impossible world of the story and the normative world of the reader, guiding them through the process of adaptation. The breathless narration nudges the reader this way and that, gradually closing-off uncanny explanations:

> […] some guy was saying he'd got a text from his brother and it was happening all over the place, which obviously was correct it turned out, and it was ISIS, which obviously in retrospect was not, but tells you what it was like, that confusion and fear, with no one at the time having any idea what was actually going on.
>
> Hinks, 2019

This style isn't an arbitrary aesthetic choice, but facilitates the story. The Russian formalist Boris Eichenbaum defined this mode as '*skaz',* 'in which a special role belongs to articulation, miming, sound gestures, etc.' (Eichenbaum, 1927: 14). The narrator's voice has a marked conversational tone, with awkward grammatical formulations that suggest revisions mid-utterance. The formulation 'which obviously was correct it turned out' appends 'it turned out' onto the utterance, as though the speaker decides she needs to add it for clarification. The more usual formulation would be: 'obviously, as it turned out, this was correct.'

My approach owes no small debt to the stories of George Saunders, who uses this style to great effect. For example, 'Exhortation' (Saunders, 2013: 83-83). takes the form of a memo from Todd, a team leader, to his staff; it emerges, as the story progresses, that the team are engaged in a sinister task — we might infer they are tasked with cleaning bodies from the mysterious 'Room 6' (Saunders, 2013: 88) — which is affecting morale, and Todd's memo is intended to galvanise them. Here he discusses another team member, Andy, who has experienced some form of breakdown due to the nature of the work:

> No matter how disconsolate and sort of withdrawn he gets (and I think we've all noticed that he's gotten pretty withdrawn since October), you will not find me closely monitoring his numbers, although for others I cannot speak, others may be monitoring that troubling falloff in Andy's numbers, although really I hope they're not, that would not be fair, and believe me if I get wind of it I will definitely let Andy know, and if Andy's too depressed to hear me, I'll call Janice at home.
>
> Saunders, 2013: 200

His formulation of 'you will not find me closely monitoring his numbers, although for others I cannot speak' shows that, even in a written message, Todd revises his thoughts as he goes along; within the same utterance, he attempts to be motivating, while insinuating a threat. Similarly, the narrator of 'What Happened' revises mid-utterance, to clarify and justify actions that might otherwise appear morally dubious to her interlocutor: 'we did what we were told which was to get away from the falling bodies which could kill you of course if they landed on top of you, which was absolutely the right thing to do' (Hinks: 2019). In this, I was attempting to insinuate

that within the act of relating the events 'out-loud', the narrator has, perhaps for the first time, realised that her actions might seem questionable — that abandoning people dying on the railway tracks was a morally dubious action. With the *skaz* voice, the narrator can betray herself in a way that would, in my view, be less likely to find its way into a written account, as people tend to write more self-consciously than they speak. This is particularly useful when she's outlining the reasons for Glen's suicidal tendencies: '…starting with a time in primary school when he was in love or had a crush on some girl or whatever…' The voice lets her be pragmatic and dismissive under the pretext of vagueness, in a way that a 'written' narration wouldn't permit.

Using a *skaz* voice also means I don't have to linger on methodical explanations/justifications of the inexplicable event that would slow the story down (or raise tricky questions I don't want to answer). The momentum of the narrator's oral story-telling style keeps the reader's attention focused on what I see as the important parts of the story, and diverts them from expositional detail. As the narrator makes revisions and corrections, dropping in snippets of information she 'forgot' to mention before, the speed of her delivery permits the story to dispense with the strict chronological order of the *fabula* without, I hope, seeming too contrived.

Lastly, the *skaz* voice helps me to be playful with setting. In the passage where Glen makes his confession, we don't know they're in a restaurant until the narrator says, 'this was in the Taste of Istanbul, of all places' and the restaurant materialises around them, whereas a third-person narrative voice might incline me toward linear scene setting. I find that writing in a *skaz* voice frees me from writing well-grooved, overly cerebral prose, which can be constricting. It lets me take risks. Israeli author Etgar Keret describes the effect:

> It's much more like surfing, you take your board, you go into the water, you wait for the wave, and then you jump on the board, and the only thing you're trying to do is not fall off the board. You really don't ask yourself, 'Where am I heading? Where will it end? What am I trying to say?' You just say, 'If I keep the tone, the tone will take me somewhere.' And I don't know how much fun it is to read those stories, but it's an amazing feeling to write them, because you really feel like you're not constructing something; it's like something falling out of your forehead.
>
> Keret interviewed by Treisman, 2015

Likewise, Portuguese short story writer Jacinto Lucas Pires advocates switching off cerebral decision-making in favour of following the fictive logic of characters (and their voices), describing himself as: 'Like those women in the law courts, who type with those machines, the wonderful women who type very fast' (Pires interviewed by Hinks, 2011).

Temporal Distancing

'What Happened' appropriates another Kafka technique most notably used in 'In The Penal Colony' (Kafka, 1919:140-167) and 'A Hunger Artist' (Kafka, 1922: 268-277) — that of narrating a future world *retrospectively*. Even though 'A Hunger Artist' is set in the future (or the 'future' at the time of writing), the narrator tells the story as though he's *looking back* on the event from a point *even further* in the future:

> During these last decades the interest in professional fasting has diminished. It used to pay very well to stage such performances under one's own management, but today that is quite impossible. We live in a different world now.
>
> Kafka, 1922: 268

'A Hunger Artist' posits that the supernatural phenomenon is already known to society, and by extension, the assumed 'reader' of the account. Accordingly, the storyteller need not linger on the adaptation of characters to the phenomenon; temporal distancing facilitates précis of the societal and psychological impact of the supernatural phenomenon, hastening adaptation.

'What Happened' attempts something similar. It purports to be set some time in the future, and to relate events that happened in 2020.

Actual time of writing	Time of story	Time of narration
2019 (now)	2019	Some years after 2019

The first paragraph of 'What Happened' is devoted to achieving this effect, by emphasising that attitudes to suicide have changed since 2020:

> It wasn't unusual back then for a train to be delayed because of a fatality on the line. There'd be an announcement, and you'd all have to sit there and wait while they removed the obstruction, and people who commuted by train, they simply got used to this happening. I'm not saying it was a regular occurrence, and of course when it happened you felt bad about it, but it's not like it was a massive thing either. Maybe that sounds callous, but this was 2019, and attitudes change.
>
> Hinks, 2019

We're used to hearing people describing past events in similar terms (for example: *In those days, it was considered shameful to be an unmarried mother, and you'd be thrown off the estate*). The narrative of 'What Happened' borrows this tone, as if to chivvy the reader into adaptation.

Speed and Misdirection

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino advises storytellers to pare-down expositional narration, taking leaps through time: 'Sicilian storytellers use the formula *lu cuntu nun metti tempu* (time takes no time in a story) when they want to leave out links or indicate gaps of months or even years' (Calvino, 1988: 35). This can create a dreamlike effect, as scenes of most import are disproportionately enlarged, while exposition is discarded[13]. Angel Flores argues that, in the work of Kafka, 'Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity, and the unreal happens as part of reality' (Flores, 1955: 191). A noteworthy example of this is Kafka's 'A Country Doctor' (Kafka, 1919: 220-225), in which the doctor sets off to visit his patient, who lives ten miles away, and immediately arrives: 'as if my patient's farmyard had opened out just before my courtyard gate, I was there already' (Kafka, 1919: 220-225).

Kafka was perhaps inspired by temporal distortions he reported experiencing prior to sleeping. In his diaries and letters, he often recalls the liminal space between wakefulness and dreams: '[…] again it was the power of my dreams, shining forth into wakefulness even before I fall asleep, which did not let me sleep' (Kafka, Diaries). According to sleep neurologists Perciaccante and Coralli (2016) 'This seems to be a clear description of a hypnagogic hallucination, a vivid visual hallucination

[13] One can, I suppose, argue that all fiction which re-organises *fabula* material into a *syuzhet* narrative — magnifying that which is of most import — is, in its distortions, dreamlike.

experienced just before the sleep onset'. Deo and Charlier (2016) suggest that Kafka sustained this state deliberately, to facilitate his creative imagination.

In practical terms, the ellipsis Kafka uses in 'The Country Doctor', is an elegant means of dispensing with expositional passages about the doctor's journey to visit the patient. I conjecture that it also has a number of ancillary functions: i) it promises the reader that their time will not be wasted on passages that are not pertinent or interesting; ii) it destabilises the reader's expectations of the scope of the story: if we can travel ten miles in an instant, what else might be possible within this fictive universe? iii) it draws attention to its own fictionality, and to the role of the narrator as our interlocutor; iv) it brings the two scenes closer together (the doctor's stable yard and the patient's house), so the resonances and juxtapositions between them are amplified.

Calvino (quoting Leopardi) says: 'Speed and consciousness of style please us because they present the mind with a rush of ideas that are simultaneous or follow each other so quickly that they seem simultaneous, and set the mind afloat on such an abundance of thoughts or images or spiritual feelings that either it cannot embrace them all, each one fully, or it has not time to be idle and empty of feelings' (Calvino, 1988: 43). In his 'Laughing With Kafka' essay, David Foster Wallace claims that: 'Great short stories and great jokes have a lot in common. Both depend on what communication theorists call 'exformation,' which is a certain quantity of information *removed from* and *evoked by* a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient' (Foster Wallace, 1998: 24).

I aimed to achieve something akin to this in 'Green Boots' Cave', with the fast juxtaposition of two scenes, without expositional justification: David Sharp dying of exposure on Everest, and the narrator dreaming his life at a teenage party:

> I dreamed the longest dream I've ever dreamed. It lasted years. It was a dream of my own life, from birth. It was every bit as detailed as my life had been, though of course, in the dream, I had no knowledge that I was dreaming, nor of my life outside the dream: that I was passed-out on the couch at my parents' house, with my friends looking on.
>
> In this way, I lived the first seventeen years of my life twice over.
>
> Hinks: 2019

This passage isn't logically linked to the Everest section — there's no stated cause-and-effect between the two events, though I would expect readers to notice that one scene is an echo of the other, positing an equivalence between Sharp, dying and helpless on Everest, and the quotidian way that life can pass people by. This thematic echoing is described by Wolf Schmidt in the online *Living Handbook of Narratology* as 'non-temporal linking in narration':

> The foremost manifestation of non-temporal linking, which is based on the *paradigmatic* structure of the text, is equivalence (Jackson, 1960) comprising both similarity and contrast […] Equivalence produces, against the sequentiality of the story, a simultaneity of elements which are often distant from one another not only on the syntagmatic axis of the text, but also on the time axis of the story.
>
> Schmidt, 2013

The passage has a secondary, but no less important, effect: it disrupts readers' expectations about where this story might go and what it might encompass, whilst still adhering to the supernatural phenomenon proposed by the story — that one might experience a lifetime in a moment of hallucination. In this, I hope to destabilise the reader's expectations: if we can jump, without warning, to a teenage party, where else might this story go? I'm very much influenced in this approach by Hassan Blasim, whose stories often make great leaps through time and space within a single paragraph. This excerpt is from 'The Reality and the Record':

> We were drinking tea at the hospital door when the Professor said: 'While my friend Dawoud was driving the family car through the streets of Baghdad, an Iraqi poet in London was writing a fiery article in praise of the resistance, with a bottle of whiskey on the table in front of him to help harden his heart. Because the world is all interconnected, through feelings, words, nightmares, and other secret channels, out of the poet's article jumped three masked men. They stopped the family car and killed Dawoud, his wife, his child and his father. His mother was waiting for them at home. Dawoud's mother doesn't know the Iraqi poet nor the masked men. She knows how to cook the fish which was awaiting them. The Iraqi poet fell asleep on the sofa in London in a

> drunken stupor, while Dawoud's mother's fish went cold and the sun set in Baghdad.
>
> Blasim, 2009: 5

This passage has little to do with the plot of 'The Reality and The Record' in the strictest sense, save for the inference that the poet is culpable for encouraging the resistance movement. But it broadens the scope of the story, destabilising the reader's expectations about which direction it might take next. In this respect, 'Green Boots' Cave' attempts to depict a universe similar that in 'The Reality and the Record'; a world which is 'all interconnected, through feelings, words, nightmares, and other secret channels' (Blasim, 2009: 5).

4. Hinterlands

'Artifice' is not an exclusory genre categorisation: the Artifice story does not necessarily sit adjacent to other genres such as the Fantastic (cf Todorov's definition), magic realism, weird fiction, new weird, slipstream, absurd fiction, fabulist fiction, irreal fiction, SF, or indeed, stories that employ one or more of the many literary strategies occluded by the term 'postmodernism'[14]. But rather, some texts within these genre categories also possess the properties of an Artifice story.

In investigating just where these intersections occur, my task is problematized by a tendency within contemporary literary study to abandon tools of formalist narrative analysis in favour of defining genre according to entirely different criteria, including whether its writers cover certain subject matter or originate from a particular culture, or a list of the textural ingredients of a story (the inclusion of therianthropy, ghosts, fairies, gothic paraphernalia, etc.). As Farah Mendlesohn notes: 'Classification of fantasy remains locked into definitions which link to origins and to non-genre criticism […] we cannot avoid the swathes of what has worryingly come to be typified as 'genre fantasy' a wide category which generally encompasses quest fantasies and anything with elves in it' (Mendlesohn, 2002: 1).

The two approaches are at odds: just as not all sonnets are love poems and not all love poems are sonnets, not all Artifice stories are magic realist and not all magic realist stories are Artifice stories. A comprehensive investigation into all genres related to the Artifice story is beyond the scope of this thesis, but having delineated Artifice fiction and Todorov's Fantastic, I will briefly clarify the relationship between the Artifice structure and three generic categorisations it is found to inhabit: magic realism, irrealism and SF. In doing so, I will concentrate on the work of relatively small groups of theorists who have taken a formalist approach to defining these respective genres, rather than those who adopt approaches (post-colonial, feminist, queer, etc.), which don't interrogate story structure.

[14] Any given Artifice story might be described as postmodern, insofar the juxtaposition of real and unreal elements might be said to challenge the notion of empirical truth, in accordance with the *Encyclopedia Britannica* definition of post-modernism.
https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy Accessed 10/01/2020

Artifice and Magical Realism

The term magic realism arose in relation to art criticism, in Franz Roh's 1925 essay 'After expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting' (as cited in Asayesh & Arargüç, 2017: 25), to describe the emergence of hyper-realist painting in the photographic era. It was later popularized in relation to South American writers in the article 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction' by Angel Flores (1955: 186), referencing the stories of Borges, Casares and Ocampo. Flores traces the genre to Kafka, and beyond to Russians including Gogol (Flores, 1955: 189), and describes the magic realist school as having 'the same preoccupation with style and also the same transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal' (Flores, 1955: 190).

However, there is no contemporary consensus on what, in formalist terms, actually constitutes a magic realist text. As Amaryll Beatrice Chanady notes, in 'Magical Realism Revisited': 'There are several conflicting definitions of magic realism today, and no absolute criteria allow us to determine which ones are "right" or "wrong"' (Chanady, 2003: 440). Moreover, Chanady resists the notion of establishing a poetics of magic realism in formalist terms, wondering if it 'may not contravene the very spirit of the mode, which refuses to submit to any constricting forms and conventions and constantly invents new ways of expressing our complex reality' (Chanady, 2003: 442). My own methodology is entirely contrary: to identify and define a particular form according to the constrictions and conventions employed by its authors.

Chanady does, however, posit formalist distinctions between magic realism and the Fantastic (cf. Todorov's definition, in which the postulated reader-response is hesitation), and these distinctions might be examined to help understand what kind of magic realist stories qualify as Artifice, and why. According to Chanady, Todorov's Fantastic is characterised by a state of antinomy, as the introduction of an inexplicable event to a rational context creates a state in which two incompatible belief systems must co-exist. Chanady proposes that the emergence of the Fantastic story was a product of post-enlightenment rationalism: 'While rationalism was rapidly becoming dominant in certain sectors of society, earlier beliefs by no means disappeared, and still formed part of the cultural tradition of even the educated elite' (Chanady, 2003: 430). In the Fantastic story, the supernatural object or entity — often of pre-modern

origins — embodied residual pre-enlightenment beliefs. Clemens Ruthner agrees that, 'In this context, the Fantastic is emerging as a medium for the (post-religious) experience of alterity, the (hegemonically undesired) return of what is culturally repressed, pre-modern knowledge, and discontent in civilization' (Ruthner, 2012: 51). Robert Scholes, in his 1975 defence of Todorov against Lem, reiterates this schism:

> Historically speaking, prior to what we refer to as the "Enlightenment", there could be no such hesitation. The supernatural was accepted as a part of life. Witches and God co-existed with men and women, and a story could, in Todorov's terms, be "marvellous", but never "fantastic". Examples abound: Sinbad the Sailor, fairy tales, chivalric romances.
>
> Scholes: 1975

And whereas in pre-modern literature, 'there was no absolute distinction between the fantastic and the real' (Knowles, 1996: 4; 6, as cited by Cornwell, [1988] 2006: 42), readers of the Fantastic were now presumed to hesitate when faced with the supernatural.

Chanady stresses that magic realism operates differently to the Fantastic in that it can accommodate both folklore *and* modernity without engendering antinomy. The dichotomies between natural/supernatural or science/religion are suspended in the magic realist text.

> While the supernatural is represented as a threat to reason (as well as to personal safety) in the European Fantastic in the restricted sense, and is thus explicitly presented in the text as antinomious with respect to the laws of reason, the supernatural, as well as highly improbable events, are presented without any comment by the magic realist narrator.
>
> Chanady, 2003: 431

Magic realist stories, then, don't transgress the natural laws of their fictive setting; rather, their authors conjure a fictive universe in which the need for consistency in natural law is deferred. In magic realism, 'the antinomy between the real and the unreal, or the natural and the supernatural, is not explicitly thematized as it is in the Fantastic' (Chanady, 2003: 431). I conjecture that 'explicitly thematized' in effect

means that a Fantastic text amplifies the hesitation of characters when a supernatural event is introduced into their world. The corollary is that within the magic realist story, characters adapt to the introduction of supernatural data.

So are all Artifice stories in fact magic realist stories? A key characteristic of the Artifice story — according to my own definition — is the limitation of the supernatural impetus: there is only one impossible event, or a sequence of conditional impossible events proceeding from the first. Many magic realist stories, as Chanady says, lack this systemization: '[…] magic realism often presents the supernatural and improbable in the form of unconnected events that cannot be systematized in any way' (Chanady, 2003: 432). In magic realism, supernatural events are not necessarily deployed to engender hesitation or adaptation; instead, they might resolve a narrative situation (*deus ex machina*) or illustrate the inner psychology of a character. G. S. Evans (2013: 153) cites the ascension of Remedios in Gabrielle García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as an example of this, as she floats off into 'the upper atmosphere where not even the highest-flying birds of memory could reach her' (Márquez, 1967: 118) much as Mary ascends in the Assumption, a literalisation of her inner divinity. Such transfigurations are essentially descriptive.

In Artifice short stories, transfigurations and metamorphoses are the destination of the story, rather than stations it passes *en route* elsewhere. The protagonist in Julio Cortázar's short story 'Axolotl' gradually transforms into an amphibian over the duration of the story, to be, like them, 'condemned infinitely to the silence of the abyss' (Cortázar, 1962: 7). The bereaved protagonist in Santiago Dabove's 1946 short story 'The Train', on finding that his world has been altered unrecognisably by the death of his wife, throws himself from a high window, whereupon, 'The flesh of my body, which was about to shatter into pieces, dispersed into memories. The band of memories, together with my body, was delivered to my mother' (Dabove, in Borges and Casares, 1990: 110). Julia Armfield's short story 'Mantis' describes the transfiguration of a teenage girl, upon her first sexual encounter:

> My skin starts to slip off my bones with a heaviness of sheer relief and the shell beneath it is something like my Mother's; the hard, pale surface of unblemishable cold. My teeth drop, my wig slips and I am something else

> entirely. A suddenness of mandibles and curving neck, eyes sliding into lateral position, long hands that bent straight down as if in intended prayer.
>
> Armfield, 2019: 17

Notably, in these stories by Cortázar, Dabove and Armfield, metamorphoses come at the climax of the narrative, as their protagonists are reduced to an elemental characteristic of themselves, be it an animal, or a collection of memories. In spite of the adaptation coming late in the story, they quality as Artifice according to my own rules:

> 1) That it contains an event that is hitherto impossible and inexplicable within the normative world of the story.
>
> 2) That there is only one impossible event, or a sequence of conditional impossible events proceeding from the first.
>
> 3) That one or more characters must be seen to adapt to the impossible event — that is, to accept its actuality.

Another factor that distinguishes the Artifice story from the broader genre of magic realism is whether the supernatural event (or series of events) is introduced within the *syuzhet*, implied as an event contained within the *fabula* of the story (see rule 1), or is proposed as a *pre-existing* attribute of the universe the characters inhabit. If the latter, it surely meets Todorov's criteria for the marvellous text: 'The marvellous implies that we are plunged into a world whose laws are totally different from what they are in our own, and in consequence that the supernatural events which occur are in no way disturbing' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 172). In the marvellous magic realist story, the reader enters an unfamiliar universe, in which unrealities already pertain. In the Artifice story, by contrast, the reader enters a nominally familiar universe, which is disrupted by the introduction of an unreality. Kafka does not invite us to believe that, prior to his uneasy dream, Gregor Samsa inhabited a world in which it was normal for people turned into bugs. Similarly, Adam Marek's 'The Stone Thrower', does not purport to be set in a world where it is normal for small boys to throw stones at great

distance and with unerring accuracy. If it did, Hal would not react with surprise and panic at the stone thrower and the uncertain danger he poses (Marek, 2012: 43).[15]

Chanady makes a further point about magic realism: 'fictitious characters in magic realism sometimes marvel at realistic events and objects' (Chanady, 2013: 431), citing characters' reacting with astonishment to the existence of ice in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This is a reversal of the antinomical dichotomy of natural-disrupted-by-supernatural found in the Fantastic story, and indeed the Artifice story. When a character in a magic realist story marvels at an encounter with an object that is realistic to the contemporary reader, this enforces the notion that their fictive world is alien to the presumed reader. The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky called this technique 'Estrangement' (Shklovsky,1917: 3-25), in reference to Tolstoy, who sometimes depicts characters describing familiar objects in awed detail, to enforce their sense of dislocation from the world.

The technique raises the possibility of stories in which the normative fictive world operates according to consistent supernatural rules (for example, spells are commonplace), wherein a 'natural' object is introduced (an object from our world) that transgresses or challenges the laws of the fictive world, and to which the characters must adapt. An example from the British literary canon is Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (2003), wherein Gulliver's possessions are inexplicably large to the Lilliputians[16].

Another example can be found in the Ursula Le Guin story 'Semley's Necklace' (Le Guin, 2015: 9-28). The story opens with a passage in which Rocannon, a 'League scientist' observes a 'very tall, dark-skinned, yellow haired' woman in a museum, browsing the contents of a display case, surrounded by smaller troglodytes. He confirms that she is a member of the 'Angyar' species, after consulting the '*Abridged Handy Pocket Guide to Intelligent Life Forms*' (Le Guin, 2015: 9-10).

The story then cuts to the story of the eponymous heroine, who inhabits a realm that is approximately equivalent, in technological development, to early

[15] One might conceivably argue that the supernatural event in both 'The Metamorphosis' and 'The Stone Thrower' first occur moments prior to the opening sentence of these stories, as both Gregor and Hal awake to their situations from a state of sleep; however, both phenomena are the instigating event within the *fabula*, effecting a change on the normative world the characters inhabit, and are the first event mentioned in the *syuzhet*.

[16] *Gulliver's Travels* does not qualify as an Artifice story according to my own criteria, due to Gulliver adapting to multiple unreal elements.

medieval Britain, albeit with the addition of two marvellous elements: Pegasus-like flying horses and troglodyte tribes with telepathic powers. On her quest to recover a precious stolen necklace, Semley ventures with the troglodytes through a cave portal where she encounters marvellous technology that is contemporaneous to the 21st century reader; an underground train, a tunnel illuminated by electric light, factories producing consumer goods: 'You can see a few of our endless marvels, the lights that burn forever, the car that pulls itself, the machines that make our clothes and cook our food and sweeten the air and serve us in all things' (Le Guin, 2015: 21). Semley and the troglodytes eventually arrive at a museum, where artefacts from her culture, including the necklace she seeks, are exhibited. It becomes evident that the museum is curated by advanced humans who, possessing the means for interplanetary space travel, have discovered her planet, and named it 'New South Georgia' (Le Guin, 2015: 24).

Artifice and Irreal Fiction

Several theorists, including Evans, Whittenburg, et al, have proposed 'Irreal' fiction as a genre definition for texts containing impossible events within an otherwise normative setting, and also claim 'The Metamorphosis' as an exemplary text, along with works by Kobo Abe, Clarice Lispector and Borges. In 'What is Irrealism?' (Evans and Whittenberg, 2013: 152-158), G.S. Evans defines the impossible event in the Irreal story as 'fundamentally and essentially unpredictable (in that it is not based on any traditional or scientific concept of physics)' (Evans, 2013: 154). He cites 'The Metamorphosis' as a paragon of the Irreal story, because 'Put in fictional terms, there is no reason, no motive, for the strange events occurring in the story, nor is there any protagonist — such as a wizard, scientist, god or practical joker — making them happen' (Evans, 2013: 154).

But as with magic realism, the Irreal definition diverges from the Artifice on the limitation, or otherwise, of supernatural events. Evans draws attention to the unconstrained impossible in the Irreal text, when comparing it to other genres (fairy tale, myth, magic realism), claiming that, 'in these other genres, there is an internal consistency to the 'impossible' physics of the story; that is, once the reader understands and accepts this alternative physics, he or she can assume that the story and the world it describes will be consistent with it' (Evans, 2013: 153). By

deduction, one must conclude that Evans believes the impossible physics of the Irreal story to be *inconsistent*, that the rules of an Irreal story are inscrutable and subject to revision.

If this is the case, I'm unconvinced that 'The Metamorphosis' can be considered Irreal, as Kafka, having established the parameters of Gregor's transformation, retains internal consistency until the conclusion of the story. There are no further supernatural events after Gregor turns into a bug. WR Irwin describes the transformation exemplified in 'The Metamorphosis' thus: 'The single arbitrary change, occurring sometimes within the represented action and sometimes before it, is the cause from which all else follows' (Irwin, 1976: 101). This is a defining property of the Artifice story, as described by my own second rule: 'That there is only one impossible event, or a sequence of conditional impossible events proceeding from the first.' In 'The Metamorphosis', Kafka sets the rules and sticks to them.

The other point of departure between Irrealism and Artifice is located in the claims of some Irrealists about the allegorical/metaphorical/symbolic agency of the Irreal story. Evans insists that readers, when 'confronted with the physics of an Irreal story, attempt to reduce it to such a symbolic or satirical scheme. But for a story to succeed as Irreal, this attempt on the part of the reader must ultimately be frustrated' (Evans, 2013: 156). This is similar to Todorov's third condition of the Fantastic: 'the reader must adopt a certain attitude to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as poetic interpretations' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 33). Following Evan's logic, we can only conclusively decide on whether any given story is Irreal by surveying each of its readers about the extent to which they were able to reduce it to a 'symbolic or satirical scheme'. As Brooke-Rose and Lem note (as discussed above, and in the chapter 'Artifice and Allegory'), a postulated reader-response is an unsatisfactory basis for defining a genre.

I'm more sympathetic to Dean Swinford's description of Irrealism as 'a peculiar mode of postmodern allegory' (Swinford, 2013: 176), which features the 'allegorical scaffolding indicative of [after Fredrick Jameson] "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"' (Swinford, 2013: 178). Swinford argues that while medieval allegory — referent to scripture — was codified into a stable canon of widely understood allegorical tropes (lions, doves, etc.), the allegorical apparatus of the 20th and 21st century Irrealists as yet lacks codification (which theorists of the Irreal, like Swinford, are endeavouring to assemble). According to Swinford, the Irreal:

> […] occurs at the moment when universal and accidental symbols become equally arbitrary, because there is no longer a biological referent, a universal experience, which separates the two. Instead, these categories collapse. For the Irreal imagination, both the accidental and universal symbol refer to the source of bewildering, destabilising trauma.
>
> Swinford, 2013: 192

Setting aside objections to Swinford's evocation of a singular 'Irreal imagination', I agree that 'The Metamorphosis' appears to hedge the reader away from a single allegorical interpretation, which Albert Camus describes as Kafka's tendency to offer 'explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified, require that the story be reread from another point of view' (Camus, 1942: 120). Likewise, Shimon Sandbank says of Kafka:

> What makes it entirely new is that it always points to a truth beyond itself but never commits itself to the truth to which it points. His stories present themselves as interpretations, point to a text beyond them, but are deprived of the doctrine they represent. They are so many pointers to an unknown meaning.
>
> Sandbank, 1989, as cited by the Café Irreal website.[17]

As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson observe in *Metaphors We Live By*, 'Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what we cannot comprehend totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices and spiritual awareness' (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003: 134). In the face of this, the writer of the Irreal story, or indeed the Artifice story, is surely powerless to prevent the reader from deriving metaphorical meaning from the text. While the Irrealists claim resistance to allegorical interpretation as a defining property of the Irreal story, I do not. My definition of the Artifice form makes no claims on reader-response, and as such, an Artifice story does not cease to be one the moment a reader alights on a symbolic/metaphoric/allegoric interpretation.

[17] Regrettably, I am unable to locate the page number for this quotation, as the book is out of print and unavailable in UK libraries.

Artifice and Science Fiction

Todorov falls foul of Lem when he casts science fiction into the realm of the marvellous. 'It must be noted here that the best science fiction texts are organised analogously [to 'The Metamorphosis']. The initial data are supernatural: robots, extra-terrestrial beings, the whole interplanetary context' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 172). Lem asserts that robots do exist, and that our interplanetary context is far from imaginary. He cites Fred Hoyle's novel *The Black Cloud* (Hoyle, 1959), in which the Sun is swallowed by a black cloud, as a narrative that Todorov would dismiss as marvellous because the initial data is supernatural (Lem, 1974: 231). For Lem, and others with an interest in SF, such data is indeed predicated on scientific fact and, as it does not transgress the laws of physics, it may be possible in the future. The disagreement between Todorov and Lem is over their qualification of 'supernatural', which exposes the folly of relying on reader-response as a defining property of genre — in this case, because we can't predict whether any given reader will view as-yet uninvented technological marvels as scientific or supernatural in provenance.

In my own definition of the Artifice story, rule one states: 'That it contains an event that is hitherto *impossible and inexplicable within the normative world of the story*' (my emphasis). This means that an Artifice story can be set in a world that is entirely alien to ours, and includes any number of technological — or indeed supernatural — marvels, so long as they are portrayed as part of the normative world of the story, whereupon an event occurs which was 'hitherto impossible and inexplicable'. The inclusion of SF tropes — whether interplanetary travel, co-existence with alien species, telepathy, alternative energy sources — that are impossible, but are explicable within this normative world, does not qualify a story as Artifice. However, this fictive context does not prohibit the introduction of an event/object that is *hitherto* impossible and inexplicable within the normative world of that story, which would qualify the story as Artifice. For example, the formulation 'As Gregor Samsa awoke in his spaceship one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect' is the premise of an Artifice story, so long the story implies that the normative world of this space-travelling Gregor Samsa did not heretofore include people turning into bugs.

A noteworthy example of an Artifice story within the SF genre is 'The Sentinel' by Arthur C Clarke (Clarke. 1951: 147-162). The story was written in 1951,

pre-lunar exploration, but is set in a future that includes marvellous attributes, even to today's reader: man is able to journey to the moon with 'two heavy freighters' (Clarke. 1951: 147), where a lunar base has been established. The protagonist, a geologist on an exploratory mission, spies a glinting object with an 'elusive symmetry' (Clarke. 1951: 152) and goes to investigate: 'I knew then that I was looking at nothing that could be matched in the antiquity of my own race. This was not a building, but a machine, protecting itself with forces that had challenged Eternity' (Clarke. 1951: 158). The object is surrounded by an invisible force field, which further designates it as supernatural. It is, the narrator speculates, a beacon to alert alien life forms to the development of life on the planet Earth: its destruction by man, alerts them that we have developed the capacity for interplanetary travel. Nonetheless, it is a supernatural object, as it does not correspond to the laws of physics as the protagonist knows them, but 'perhaps to the technology of para-physical forces' (Clarke, 1951: 59). The protagonist must adapt to a recalibrated universe in which the heretofore impossible is now possible. To Clarke, the difference between magic and the advanced technology in SF is blurred by ontological considerations. His third law of SF states that, 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic' (Clarke, 1973, 21). Ergo, the designation of a supernatural event in SF depends on both the reader's hermeneutic interpretation of the intention of the text, and on their ontological understanding of the possibilities of science.

The aforementioned Le Guin story 'Semley's Necklace' provides a fascinating edge-case of an SF-Fantasy story which could be categorised as Artifice depending on one's interpretation of the events depicted within it. It opens in the third-person extradiagetic, which after a preliminary passage becomes closely focalized through the point of view of a human man, Rocannon, who observes the alien woman Semley as she visits a museum. In this respect, the story establishes an SF context in which humans have developed interstellar travel and colonised other planets. *The Abridged Handy Pocket Guide to Intelligent Life Forms* (Le Guin, 2015: 10) that Rocannon consults mentions that the troglodytes, who accompany Semley, have telepathic powers. While these elements are impossible to us in the twenty-first century, they are established within Rocannon's *Lebenswelt* understanding of his normative world. At this juncture of the narrative, 'Semley's Necklace' does not qualify as an Artifice

story because it does not meet my first condition: 'That it contains an event that is hitherto impossible and inexplicable within the normative world of the story.'

The story then switches to focalization though Semley's point of view, in analepsis, as she begins her quest for her family heirloom, the necklace. Semley's world contains marvellous elements that are normative to her, including her 'windsteed' (Le Guin, 2015: 15), the flying horse she rides on her quest. The story also alludes to beings called 'Starlords', who 'had appeared with their houses that leaped about on pillars of fire and their awful weapons that could level hills' (Le Guin, 2015: 15). Starlords, it will transpire, are the humans who have colonised her planet. The disparity in technological advancement between humans and the Angyar species to which Semley belongs, means that 'A returning [human] explorer finds his own doings a few years back have become the gestures of a god' (Le Guin, 2015: 9), recalling Clarke's third rule: 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.' (Clarke, 1973, 21)

Likewise, at this juncture, the story is still not Artifice, as it does not meet the condition that 'That it contains an event that is *hitherto* impossible and inexplicable within the normative world of the story' The arrival of the Starlords happens prior to the *fabula* of the story, and is a facet of Semley's normative world.

Arguably, the story only becomes Artifice after Semley and the troglodytes journey to the museum, which necessitates light-speed travel through an underground portal. Semley, ignorant of human technology, experiences this journey as a period of two days, but upon her return to her world with the necklace, she finds that her family have aged many years, and her husband has died. This is experienced as magic by the Angyar, who ask: 'If it were true to Clayfolk had captured her and kept her under a spell all these long years, or had it been the Fiia with their strange arts?' (Le Guin, 2015: 27). And so at the close of the story, one could argue that Semley has experienced a hitherto impossible event within her normative world, and adapted to it.

But the question of whether a hitherto impossible event has actually occurred has an anthropological dimension; the issue is complicated in the story by the inclusion of two different points of view, which destabilise the notion of what is normative: that of Semley, of the Angyar alien race, and Rocannon, the human scientist, each of whom experience and interpret the world in different ways. Light-speed travel is part of Rocannon's normative world, and his perspective undermines a reading of Semley's experience as supernatural. Conversely, the reader might suppose

that Rocannon would regard marvellous elements of Semley's world — for example, the windsteed — as supernatural (he is not depicted as being aware of them), but from Semley's point of view, they are normative. As Rocannon reflects to his colleague after presenting Semley with the necklace: 'What I feel sometimes is that I… meeting these people from worlds we know so little of, you know, sometimes… that I have as it were blundered through the corner of a legend, or a tragic myth, maybe, which I do not understand' (Le Guin, 2015: 25).

Edge Cases: Impossible vs. Improbable

Clarke and Le Guin's stories return us to the problem of genre categorisation raised by Lem (1974: 227-237), wherein he objects to Todorov's assertion that 'robots, extra-terrestrial beings, the whole interplanetary context' (Todorov, [1973] 1975: 172) belong to the realm of the supernatural. The question of whether an event transgresses the laws of physics may depend on the reader's ontological position on scientific possibility.

Some cases are easy to dispense with. Let us consider two stories that feature people throwing stones — Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' and Adam Marek's 'The Stone Thrower' — in relation to my first Artifice story criterion: 'That it contains an event that is hitherto impossible and inexplicable within the normative world of the story.'

'The Lottery' (Jackson, [1948] 2009: 291-302) is a disquieting story in which the citizens of a small town draw lots to decide who will be stoned to death by the other townspeople. A competent, worldly reader is likely to know that the events are fictitious; however, the story does not transgress any law of physics. Notwithstanding that, the drawing of lots and the execution are depicted as a long-standing tradition within the town, and normative to that story-world. Therefore 'The Lottery' does not contain an event that is 'hitherto impossible and inexplicable within the normative world of the story' and accordingly is not an Artifice story.

The antagonist in Adam Marek's 'The Stone Thrower', on the other hand, possesses a supernatural biomechanical ability to throw stones at his victims. The reaction of Hal tells us that this is hitherto impossible and inexplicable within the normative world he inhabits. Therefore the story is an Artifice story.

Many stories posit circumstances which, like those in 'The Lottery' are improbable, but not impossible. Kafka's 'In The Penal Colony' depicts an execution machine that tattoos its victim to death. Nothing about the machine defies the laws of physics; it could be built. Chinese short story writer Diao Dou's 'Squatting' (Dou, 2015: 71-99) depicts the local council of a small city enacting an increasingly absurd series of byelaws, in an attempt to reduce crime, leading to a prohibition on venturing onto the streets at night unless one ambulates on all fours. No law of physics would prevent a local government from enacting this legislation. Neither story is Artifice.

Of my own stories, 'Тоска', 'Don't You Remember?' and 'Plinth' are improbable, and yet don't qualify as Artifice. Alistair's governmental department does not employ magic to deceive Matty in 'Тоска'. The couple in 'Don't You Remember?' gradually realise that they have entirely different recollections about the basic circumstances of their lives together, but their confusion does not transgress any physical law.

As ever, it is the marginal cases that expose the most interesting problems of genre classification. Ted Chiang's 'Tower of Babylon' (Chiang, 2002: 1-34) begins as an improbable story: 'Were the tower to be laid down across the plain of Shinar, it would take two days' journey to walk from one end to the other' (Chiang, 2002: 1). Improbable though this is, it doesn't necessarily transgress the laws of physics. As the story continues, it becomes evident that the builders of the tower have reached a carapace of stone in the sky — 'the vault' — made of white granite, which must be mined upwards if the tower is to continue its ascension. When the protagonist, the miner Hillanum, finally breaks through, he finds himself back in the desert near Babylon (Chiang, 2002: 32-33). This story, then, begins as improbable, then topples into Artifice towards its close; the carapace and portal Hillanum discovers is hitherto impossible within the story-world. Similarly, Borges' story 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (Borges, [1965]: 17-34) is improbable up to the point when the narrator implies that our world is actually becoming Tlön — that the scribes of the imaginary planet have prophesised it into being — which finally designates it as Artifice.

Several of my stories permit ambiguity about the physical possibility of the phenomenon they depict. For example, in my own view, the towers in 'Plinth' are not of supernatural provenance. However, I concede that it is possible to read the story that way; indeed, a structural engineer might refute the plausibility of a narrow, freestanding sandstone tower many thousands of feet high. My story 'Long Grey

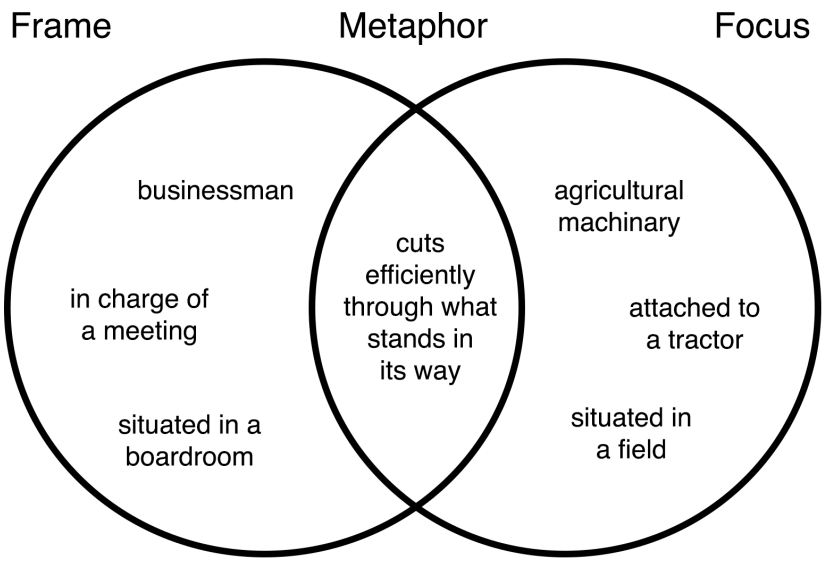
Sands' could be Artifice fiction, because the tide goes out for many miles, which a reader might consider to be a supernaturally long way. However, I am not a hydrographologist, and lack the expertise to make an authoritative judgment on whether or not this is possible with the right confluence of environmental and celestial circumstances. Genre categorizations are, then, prone to the vagaries of whichever ontological presuppositions readers bring to a story. Furthermore, if a phenomenon is designated as natural/supernatural by the reader according to its level of magnitude, this implies the existence of an axis (height, depth, distance, strength, length of time), by which we judge whether it is possible; phenomena that fall within a certain mark on the axis are natural, while those that surpass it are supernatural. But this designation must be infinitely granular, and beyond consensus. Exactly how high must a tower be, before we can agree it is impossible? How far out must a tide go? How detailed must a work of imagination be before we deem it supernatural? It is inevitable that marginal examples will continue to challenge the criteria I have set for the Artifice story.

5. Artifice and Allegory

I'll preface the discussion of metaphor and allegory in the Artifice story with a practical distinction: I use 'metaphor' to refer to the effect of one discrete event in the text — a singular sentence, utterance, image, or plot point — whereas 'allegory' will refer to the cumulative effect of multiple events within a story. If the singular image of Gregor transformed into a bug is a metaphor, the subsequent interplay between the Gregor-the-bug and the Samsa family is allegorical. Once understood, the pragmatics of metaphor can be extrapolated towards a deeper understanding of how allegory works in Artifice stories.

While the availability or non-availability of symbolic inference is not a precondition of the Artifice story — due to the inscrutability of reader-response, discussed above — it is not refutable that some Artifice stories permit metaphorical or allegorical interpretations. In discussing how the mechanics of metaphor and allegory operate in the Artifice story, I will refer to interpretations that may be available to a postulated reader, with the proviso that I don't view reader-reaction to be predicable, nor pragmatic competence to be universal. As Donald Davidson says, 'Metaphor is the dreamwork of language, and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator' (Davidson, 1978: 29).

In his paper 'Metaphor' (1954: 273-294), Max Black asserts that a metaphorical utterance has two components: the *focus* and the *frame*. In the statement 'The Chairman ploughed through the discussion', 'ploughed' is the *focus*, while the rest of the sentence provides the *frame*: contextual cues that, in their logical dissonance with the focus, suggest its metaphorical intent and meaning. The reader is invited to interpret the juxtaposition of these elements, and (it might be supposed) decide that it is unlikely that the Chairman is literally sitting astride a plough while conducting the discussion. The reader then decides which properties are shared by a chairman and a plough, e.g. the ability to cut through whatever is in its way. The pragmatic competence of the reader — their ability to parse these two elements and construct metaphorical meaning — determines the success of that metaphor.



Metaphor diagram, after Black (1955) and Ayoob (2007).

NB: Subsequent works on metaphor often refer to the focus element as the 'source' and the frame as the 'target', implying a journey as the metaphor carries meaning from one conceptual domain to another (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998: 21-23), as in translation, but I'll use focus and frame, as the terms lend themselves to discussing metaphor or allegory situated within a story.

Extrapolating from Black, stories that are set in a normative world, but for the inclusion of one or more impossible elements, might also be viewed in terms of the frame and the focus. The frame is the natural world (the normative context); the focus supernatural (the logically dissonant element). In which case, I posit that Fantastic (and Artifice) stories might invite the reader to find allegorical meanings at the intersection of focus and frame.

Todorov (1973: 33), however, insists that an allegorical reading precludes the reader-response of hesitation about whether a supernatural event has occurred. The reader of the Fantastic story 'must adopt a certain attitude to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as poetic interpretations' (ibid). The antithesis of the Fantastic text in this respect is the fable, which according to Todorov inherently invites the reader to adopt a symbolic mode of reading: 'If animals speak in a fable, doubt does not trouble the reader's mind: he knows that the words of the text are to be taken in another sense, which we call *allegorical*' (1973: 32)

In the 1st Century AD, Apollonius described Aesop's technique thus: '[…] he by announcing a story which everyone knows not to be true, told the truth by the very fact that he did not claim to be relating real events' (Philostratus [n.d.] 1912: 495). This insinuates an implied contract between Aesop and the reader/listener that the rules of the normative world are suspended for the duration of the fable. The hare and the tortoise might converse with each other within the fable (the focus), but they are not depicted interacting with our normative, quotidian world in which humans have jobs and so on (the frame). The normative frame is presumed, by the fable, to be the reader's everyday life. To generate allegorical meaning, the reader/listener is invited to map the events of the fable onto their own experience. Therefore the intersection of the Venn diagram in this instance might be filled with questions such as, *am I like the hare? Do I rush things at first, and then fail to complete them?* By comparison, Artifice stories bring the frame material (the normative world the reader is presumed to inhabit) onto the page, to sit alongside the symbolic material, literalising a process that was intuitive for the reader.

Apollonius compares fables to other modes of fiction (by poets, he means long-form narrative verse):

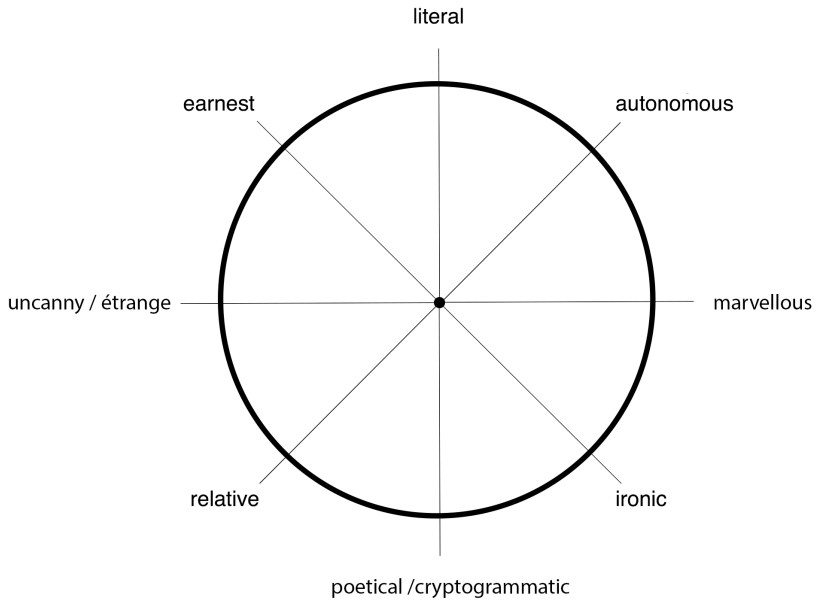
> The poet, after telling his story, leaves a healthy-minded reader cudgelling his brains to know whether it really happened; whereas one who like Aesop tells a story which is false and does not pretend to be anything else […] shows that he has made use of the falsehood merely for utility to his audience.
>
> Philostratus [n.d.] 1912: 495

Philostratus, like Todorov, seems to propose that competent readers switch between modes of reading: literal and symbolic. The 'cudgelling of brains' attends the literal mode and is analogous to the act of hesitation designated by Todorov to the reader of the Fantastic story. But is this really a binary dichotomy? Does the adoption of a literal reading mode necessarily prohibit allegorical interpretation?

Brooke-Rose contests this, proposing an axis of hesitation between literal and symbolic readings (Brooke-Rose, 1976: 155), which could be approximately vocalised as: *Am I supposed to take the ghost literally, or is it an allegory?* A reader might be hedged in one direction and then another, as the unfolding events of a story invite or inhibit allegorical interpretation. Lem furthers the argument:

> The essential thing is not the axis but the reader's act of decision. Reading a literary work indeed calls for decisions — in fact not just *one,* but an ordered set of them, as the resultant of which the genre classification of the text comes about. The reader's decisions do not oscillate *in only one dimension.* (Lem's emphasis)
>
> Lem, 1974: 227

Lem then proposes that reader-response to the fantastic text might better be represented as a multi-directional 'compass card', rather than a binary axis. He uses the terms 'poetic/cryptogrammatic' in place of 'allegorical':



Compass card diagram (my own design, using antilogies suggested by Lem).

However, for Lem, even this schema is problematic, because it cannot account for reader-responses that are simultaneously contradictory rather than fluctuating:

> The crux lies in the fact that the work can be placed on the natural and the supernatural level *at the same time,* that it can be at once earnest and ironic, and fantastic, poetic and allegorical as well. The "at the same time" predicated here implies contradictions — but what can you do, if such a text is founded

> just on contradictions? […] Yet literature manages to thrive on paradoxes, if only on ones strategically placed — precisely these constitute its perfidious advantage!
>
> Lem, 1974: 234

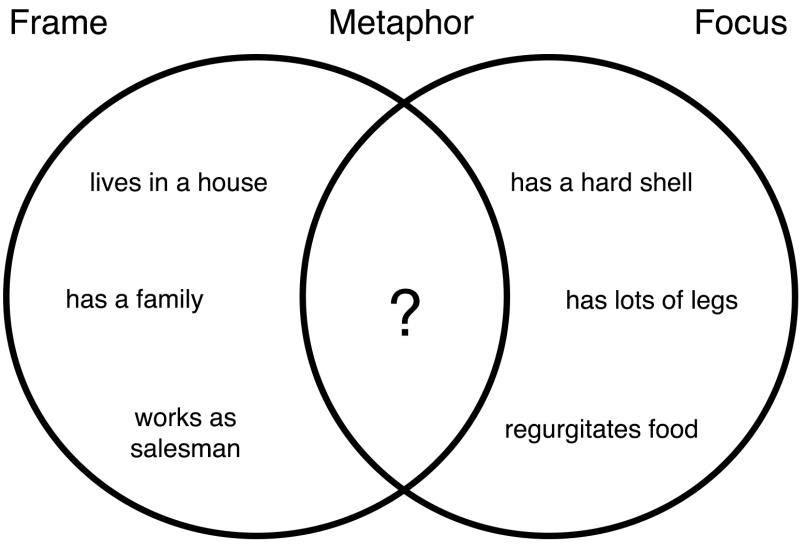
I agree with Lem. The flaw in Todorov's binary axis of hesitation is that he doesn't credit his postulated reader with the competence to simultaneously consider multiple, contradictory implications in a text (or to oscillate between them for the duration of the reading). The experience of reading a ghost story is not that of journeying through a dark tunnel to the light of the last page, during which the only available thought is 'is the ghost real?' This may be one of myriad questions and associations, as the events of the story reverberate and echo against one's life experiences, cultural references, and expectations. Hesitation over the supernatural certainly does not preclude the reader from drawing allegorical inferences from a story. Likewise, Todorov is presumptuous about his postulated reader's competence in inferring allegorical meaning in 'The Metamorphosis':

> At first glance we are tempted to attribute an allegorical meaning to 'The Metamorphosis. […] One might certainly suggest several allegorical interpretations of the text; but the text itself offers no explicit indication which would confirm any of them.
>
> Todorov, [1973] 1975: 172

I see no reason why a text must provide 'explicit indication' of a correct allegorical interpretation, in order to be read as allegory. In fact, the opposite could be said to be true: the moment a story explicitly states its own allegorical intent ('when I say x, I really mean y'), its very qualification as an allegory is in question.

Todorov also overlooks the fact that the genesis of 'The Metamorphosis' was a metaphorical phrase uttered by Kafka's father, who once called Franz's friend, the Jewish actor Jizchak Löwy, 'vermin' [*Ungeziefer*] (Kafka *Diaries*, 1921: 4). The story literalises this metaphor (a technique I will discuss later, with reference to my own Practice as Research), while retaining all the necessary components for a metaphorical interpretation according to Black's model. There is a frame (the normative, domestic setting of Gregor and his family) and a focus (he has turned into

a bug), and as shown by Black, the logical dissonance between focus and frame encourages metaphorical interpretation.



Metaphor/Allegory in 'The Metamorphosis'.

A reader's understanding of this metaphor/allegory depends on what they place in the intersection of the two Venn circles; whichever properties they suppose are shared by Gregor and a bug: for example, that both Gregor and a bug are weak, ineffectual, pitiful, and so on. An author can only provide the raw material (the focus and frame) for the postulated reader; what they make of this juxtaposition, according to their pragmatic competence, is beyond the author's control. Of course the reader might, as Todorov prefers, place nothing in the intersection of Venn circles, if they do not recognise any shared properties between Gregor and the bug, ergo they do not read the story allegorically. But to insist that this is the most likely, or most correct, reader-response seems foolhardy.

Iraqi author Hassan Blasim plays with notions of metaphorical interpretation of a supernatural event in his short story 'A Thousand and One Knives', wherein a group of Baghdadis discover they have the telekinetic power to make knives disappear. One, the narrator's wife Souad, is able to make them reappear.

The group convene to practise their trick, and to discuss what its purpose and meaning might be. In describing their speculations, Blasim imports both the frame

(the normative world of the reader) and a postulated reader-response to the symbolic (the reader's act of searching for metaphorical/allegorical meaning) *onto the page*:

> I soon came to the idea that the knives were just a metaphor for all the terror, the killing and the brutality in the country […] an extraordinary game that has no value, because it is hemmed in by definite laws.
>
> Blasim, 2012: 124

I find it interesting that Blasim's language here maps incredibly well onto Black's concept of 'focus' (the extraordinary game) and the 'frame' (definite laws). Many of Blasim's other stories also adhere to the Artifice story structure, with an impossible element (focus) set against the all-too brutal reality of war-torn Iraq (frame). In Blasim's fictive world, magic cannot overcome military and sectarian violence, and it seems to me that here Blasim is acknowledging the powerlessness of his own magic — his fiction — in the face of the war.

This appears to be borne-out as the narrator of 'A Thousand and One Knives' is tasked with finding a reason for the group's special powers, by searching the world of literature: 'I started to buy books of poetry, novels, short stories, local and translated […] in the hope that I would come across the key to the mystery of the knives' (Blasim, 2012: 128). We might suppose this anticipates the reader's assumed comparison of 'A Thousand and One Knives' to other stories with unreal elements (including the stories from its Arabic antecedent, *A Thousand and One Nights,* to which the title refers). But the narrator's studies lead him nowhere:

> One idea invalidated another and one concept disguised another. One theory made another theory more mysterious. One feeling contested another. One book mocked another book. One poem overshadowed another poem. One ladder went up and another went down. Often knowledge struck me as similar to the knife trick: just a mysterious absurdity or merely a pleasant game.
>
> Blasim, 2012: 129

Perhaps the message here is that studying literature according to systematic approaches can reduce stories to puzzles with a presumed hidden meaning, to be coaxed out by applying the correct critical framework (and my own Formalist

approaches to the Artifice story are in no way immune to this). Other authors have made similar arguments against extrapolation, and for literalism, including China Miéville, discussing monsters with Jeff VanderMeer in the *Weird Fiction Review*:

> **Miéville**: I spend a lot of time arguing for literalism of fantastic, rather than its reduction to allegory. Metaphor is inevitable but it escapes our intent, so we should relax about it. […]
> **WFR**: Right — nobody likes a monster piñata.
> **Miéville**: Yeah — it's what Toby Litt brilliantly called the 'Scooby Doo Impasse' — that people always already know that they'll pull the mask off the monster and see what it 'really' is/means. The notion that that is what makes it legitimate is a very drab kind of heavy-handedness.' (VanderMeer and Miéville).
>
> VanderMeer, 2012

I have attempted to avoid metaphorical heavy-handedness in my own work by complicating aspects of story that, read metaphorically, might be mapped too easily map onto a real-world analogue. An example of this is my story 'Absent', which takes its cue from Kafka's literalisation of the vermin metaphor. I was reflecting on the meaning of the phrase 'absent minded' and wondered how this might be plotted into a story. As I wrote, it struck me how many phrases play on the idea of being physically removed from one's own body: 'Miles away', 'Distant', 'Vacant', 'Beside myself'; a lexicon that suggests a collective societal conceptualisation (in the English language, at least) of physical displacement, to indicate states of mind. Consequently, 'Absent' began to feel like a story proposed by the English language itself, which I was merely trying to facilitate. As Anne Hegerfeldt notes, in relation to magic realism, 'By rendering the metaphor "real", the text emphasizes the power such constructions have over human thought and human action' (Hegerfeldt, 2002: 69).

However, after completing a few preliminary drafts which anchored the main plot events in place, I decided the story riffed on these phrases too much: it seemed like a vehicle for wordplay, to the potential distraction or irritation of the reader. In later drafts, I gradually stripped away much of the wordplay, as though removing the scaffolding from a building that could now stand independently.

I also made some deliberate attempts to complicate, if not entirely foreclose,

an allegorical interpretation that the physical wanderings of the protagonist represent dementia. Workshop feedback on an early draft of the story indicated that peer readers very quickly interpreted the correlation of the frame (a man in a domestic situation becoming inattentive) and the focus (the man wandering physically further from his body) as indicative of dementia. Some readers expressed satisfaction that they'd 'got it' early on, and felt that their suspicions were confirmed by the end of the story, when the protagonist is installed in a care home.

While this is a perfectly plausible interpretation of the story — and I don't believe it's within my gift as the author to sanction correct readings — I would prefer my readers to equivocate about allegorical meaning, at least for the duration of the story, lest it reduces narrative momentum. Mystery is an engine of narrative, driving the reader through the story. Readers do not only read to the end of a story to find out 'what happens' in the most literal sense of unfolding plot events, but also to find meaning. And if the reader thinks they understand the mystery, the narrative engine loses some of its power. In this respect, I am sympathetic to Todorov's claim that symbolic reading can compromise the literality of a story. Or, to adapt VanderMeer's analogy, I would prefer that the piñata did not burst prematurely, showering the readers below with allegorical treats. While it's not entirely possible to foreclose any given allegorical reading, in later drafts I stripped out some cues that might direct the reader to map the protagonist's supernatural experience onto the condition of dementia; these cues were mostly details within the 'frame' describing his deteriorating physical state and inability to care for himself.

As with 'Absent', 'Lightning' literalises an everyday phrase. In this case, 'You've got more chance of being struck by lightning' (and its variations) as a benchmark for an extraordinarily unlikely occurrence. As I recall, around the time I wrote this story, I saw a TV interview on local news with bereaved parents who were raising awareness of a genetic condition that affected only one in many million children, and it occurred to me that in those circumstances, it must feel as though you've been struck by lightning, or indeed that a divine power has singled you out for punishment. In the story, I conflate these elements, describing the most implausible kind of lightning strike I could imagine, coming down the chimney and hitting an infant in a cot. I suppose it's a moot point whether the lightning strike will be read by the reader as actually impossible — according to the laws of physics — and therefore a supernatural event, or just very unlikely, and whether therefore, this will engender

hesitation, or adaptation. The narrator's second-hand explanation of the physics pertaining to the lightning strike might hedge the reader towards hesitation, even though what he describes is actually impossible.

I would be satisfied if readers latch onto the metaphorical/allegorical intent, but as with 'Absent', I felt the story ought to do more; I don't want the reader to think 'okay, I get it', and disengage. So the lightning strike, which happens off the page right at the beginning, creates the conditions for an exploration of two parents cycling rather helplessly through societally-mandated mechanisms of grief: setting up a charity to raise awareness, despite the fact that this will serve no practical purpose in saving the lives of other children. One might view it as a callous story, although no ill intent is aimed at bereaved parents. Rather, it aims to distil the random and absurd cruelty of life, which can strike at any time (described by Paul Auster, who himself witnessed a fatal lightning strike, as 'the mechanics of reality' (Auster, 2002)). It also reflects the fact that, even in the aftermath of an incomprehensible tragedy, one might discover well-worn paths of grief where others have gone before, which, to me, intensifies the pathos of bereavement.

While reader-reaction is inscrutable, writers do rely on assumptions about the pragmatic competence of readers — including their vocabulary, the life experiences and cultural references they can draw on. Whenever we read fiction (a participatory act of make-believe), we import our own beliefs into our construct of the fictive world. For example, if we read that a character steps off a cliff, we expect gravity to operate, unless we are told otherwise, which Gendler describes as making use of 'standard assumptions about common knowledge and presupposition' (Gendler, 2000: 76). Gendler proposes that if a story is a work of realist fiction, 'regulations concerning imports will be extremely lenient: in general (though there will be numerous exceptions), if something is true in the actual world, it will be true in the fictional world' (Gendler, 2000: 76). Moreover, according to Gendler, we also *export* concepts and knowledge from make-believe into our *Lebenswelt* beliefs. We might read a novel that describes how people wore their hair in 19th century France, and export this knowledge into our repertoire, or we might imaginatively model solutions to a problem before applying them to a real-life situation (Gendler, 2000: 76). Erkenn Berto agrees that, 'The human mind has the ability to conceive or imagine […] rich

and detailed alternatives to actuality in order to extract information from them' (Berto, 2017).

Most fiction can, therefore, be said to facilitate some degree of allegorical reading, because of the comparisons available to the reader between their own life experiences outwith the story (as discussed above, in relation to fable). If a story is about a death, the reader is implicitly invited to make meaning of the story by drawing from their experiences of death, be it of a relative, friend, acquaintance, or someone on the news, whereupon the story on the page functions as an allegory for that real-life death.

As previously discussed, my story 'Green Boots' Cave' plays with this process, by literalising an assumed process of identification between the reader and the protagonist (a process that might be vocalised as, *As I read a story, I imagine what it would be like to be the protagonist*). The story is based on fact. David Sharp was a real mountaineer who really did die on Everest. His abandonment by other climbers seemed to me to be emblematic of the essential aloneness (as opposed to elective solitude) and helplessness of the human condition. My creative breakthrough was realizing that I could literalise the universality of his situation. 'Green Boots' Cave' accordingly posits that the reader actually *is* David Sharp, freezing to death on the side of Everest, and only dreaming that they are the reader of the story, in a structure that echoes the famous Zhuangzi epigram: 'Now I do not know whether it was then I dreamt I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man' (Zhuangzi [n.d.] as quoted in Borges, Ocampo & Casares [1940] 1988: 95).

In terms of allegorical interpretation, I might anticipate that the story invites the reader to question the version of themself that they imagine on a day-to-day basis ('the times you looked in the mirror and thought 'you again''), and ask whether, if the self they imagine is not the definitive version, are there other versions abroad in the world? Self-awareness and duality of personality resurface as themes in my stories, for example 'Upstairs' (unpublished and not included in *Mayflies*), in which the protagonist suddenly sees himself as (he decides) others see him: 'He'd considered himself bright and perceptive, but really he was slow, he saw that now. He was one of those people who is slow and doesn't realise it' (Hinks, 2013, unpublished). And again, in 'Absent', which recalls the protagonist seeing himself in a corporate video: 'He realised that he'd always permitted himself to believe in a better version of

himself, which must, he supposed, explain how some people are so awful and don't seem to know it' (Hinks, 2019).

My story 'A New World' aims to subvert what Farah Mendlesohn describes as a portal fantasy — 'quite simply a fantastic world entered through a portal' (Mendlesohn, 2002: 4). It's a well-worn trope, from *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* onwards. The convention in the portal fantasy is that the reader follows the protagonist (often from a first-person, or free indirect discourse point of view) and makes discoveries of an almost anthropological nature about this new world: 'The language of the portal fantasy is often elaborate, but it is the elaboration of the anthropologist…' (Mendlesohn, 2002: 4).

I attempt to subvert this trope in three ways. Firstly, the portal itself is absurdly simple, dispensing with any spells, or hidden doors, or secret conditions which must be met for the portal to open. The narrator simply imagines the portal, idly fishes around in the air with her hand, and it reveals itself. Secondly, and most importantly, the new world on the other side of the portal is identical to the old world. This allows me to portray two characters examining their everyday existence, as though seeing it afresh, exploring a new, alien world:

> The flat seemed the same as ever, when we explored it, so we said okay, let's go outside and see if anything's different there. Our street was the same, and all the shops along the main road, and the cars going past in the rain.
>
> Hinks, 2019

As in Blasim's 'A Thousand and One Knives', a supernatural event occurs, to no evident consequence, and it is this lack of consequence that leads the narrator and Steph to attribute subsequent changes that occur in their lives to their being in this 'new world'. The narrator explicitly states at the beginning of the story: 'You're the best thing about this world. And looking back, the worst thing about the old world was I didn't know you' (Hinks 2019). Likewise, when Steph decides to return through the portal to the old world, she says: '[…] there's just something about this world I don't like, even if it's that there's, like, one more grain of sand or something, or one less' (Hinks, 2019). Thirdly, the prose is markedly conversational and everyday — as banal as possible in comparison to the elaborate language that Mendlesohn (2002) associates with the portal fantasy trope. As discussed in the chapter 'Artifice, Speed

and Misdirection', a second-person 'skaz' conversational style assists the introduction of the focus (the portal) within a familiar and normative frame.

Arguably, the story literalises the sentiments people are wont to express when they fall in love — that they feel born again, see the world afresh, etc. Certainly, the intersection of focus (portal) and frame (two young women in a domestic situation), suggests allegorical readings about how one sliding-doors moment can prize apart friendships. In this respect, I had in mind the implication that it is the narrator's relationship with the second-person 'you' that creates disunion between her and Steph; that this is what Steph alludes to when she says 'one more grain of sand or something, or one less' (Hinks, 2019).

Portal stories abound in Artifice fiction, and there are other examples which present the world on the other side of the portal as disappointingly quotidian. M John Harrison's 'A Young Man's Journey to London' (Harrison, 2003: 159-177) concerns the discovery of a portal to London in a public lavatory in a cafe in Huddersfield, and echoes Borges' 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' insofar as it is a secret society puzzle. Three men venture through the portal to London, 'Their pockets are stuffed with whatever they think they might need. Chocolate, Tekna knives, gold coins, none of which in the last analysis will prove to be any good' (Harrison, 2003: 176). But the London they find is a disappointment: 'It was winter and everything was filthy. Inside, the houses smelled of vegetable peel, sewerage, perished rubber. Everyone in them was ill' (Harrison, 2003: 171). They return disappointed after three months.

Ted Chiang's 'Hell is the Absence of God' (Chiang, 2002: 245-279) posits that heaven and hell are real, tangible places. The portal to heaven opens up when angels visit the earth, and hell is a realm below ground, which humans are able to witness: 'The ground became transparent, and you could see hell as through you were looking through a hole in the floor' (Chiang, 2002: 251). But hell appears much like life above ground. Its inhabitants aren't in torment: 'The lost souls looked no different than the living, their eternal bodies resembling living ones' (Chiang, 2002: 251).

My story 'Smoking' is the product of a deliberate attempt to write an Artifice story in which the impossible element is of no consequence or import at all; even the participants in the magic are underwhelmed, and perhaps a little bored by the phenomenon. I'm teasing the reader: using their presumed expectation of a revelation — of meaning and significance — to draw them through the story, and then casting them adrift at the end without any explanation, nor hope of one. Despite being slight,

quiet in tone, and inconsequential, I consider it one of my more successful stories. I like those women, up on the stage in the community hall, and their mild bewilderment at the improbable magical power they possess.

6. Conclusion

What's the Point of the Artifice Story?

In the course of writing the *Mayflies* stories, and in my theoretical research, I have become ever more convinced that the unusual power, and indeed limitation, of the Artifice story is bound up in its disruption of the reader's metaphor-making processes. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor making is a fundamental component of human imagination: 'Imagination, in one of its many aspects, involves seeing one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing […] metaphor is thus *imaginative rationality*' (Lakhov & Johnson, 2003: 132). Whether inherently pre-disposed, or societally conditioned, competent readers are apt to search for metaphorical resonances in works of fiction, which they export (Gendler, 2002: 75-77) into their real world.

Setting aside reservations about the inscrutability of any individual reader-response, it seems reasonable to assume that, if a work of fiction depicts an event that purports metaphorical significance, but cannot be easily mapped onto a real-world analogue (due to being supernatural), this process of metaphor-making is disrupted.

But it is not as straightforward as that, because fables and fairy tales contain impossible events — animals speak, princes metamorphose into frogs, magic spells are cast — but do not leave us 'cudgelling our brains' (Philostratus, [n.d.] 1912: 495). I propose that this is because the fable entails a direct export of metaphor to the reader.

To develop Gendler's analogy of export and import: in the Artifice story, the normative frame intercepts metaphor on its way to the reader, and operates, in this sense, as a surrogate for the real-world of the reader. Before the reader can import the supernatural event and interpret it — as they would a fable — it is interpreted for them, on the page, by characters within the story, who do not treat the supernatural data as metaphorical, but as real. In the Artifice story, the frame that surrounds the metaphor is brought onstage.

What is the virtue in this? I conjecture that disruption of the metaphor-making process contains within it a resistive power against hegemony. Lakoff and Johnson claim that metaphors are not just a product of our behaviour, but by enshrine modes of behaviour. 'Metaphors create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor

may thus be a guide for future action. This will in turn reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense, metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophesies' (Lakhov & Johnson, 2003: 132). Questions abound about the political agency of the Artifice story, and the strategies its authors use to disrupt hegemonic metaphors (particularly in the work of feminist, queer and post-colonial writers). While these questions are beyond the focus of this thesis, it is my hope that the research presented here opens such avenues of enquiry for other scholars to explore.

The Impact of Artifice Stories on My Own Development as a Writer

My Practice as Research has enabled me to explore the interface between critical study and my creative practice (cf. Andrew & Nelson, 2012); the imbrication of creative endeavour and critical framework marrying into a praxis of the Artifice story.

This praxis has been circular, insofar as I set out by reading authors who seemed to be writing stories that fit my preliminary definition of the Artifice story, then consulted the work of critical theorists writing — from a formalist perspective — about these works, then experimented with writing original stories in the light of my findings, then further refined my criteria for the Artifice story; a cycle which repeated many times over the course of my studies before I arrived at workable criteria, which may yet evolve further still.

I have found it an incredibly demanding form to write. As discussed above, the author of the Artifice story is continually engaged in problem-solving: how to introduce the supernatural event, how to persuade readers of a character's adaptation to the supernatural, how to limit the scope of the supernatural event, how to avoid treading the same path — e.g. depicting cycles of media reaction — from story to story. As Edward Said noted of 'The Metamorphosis', it 'has no object but its own constant clarification' (Said, [1968] 1988: 49). The labour of clarification can be wearying.

However, I am convinced this labour has been beneficial to my story writing: in developing strategies for Artifice stories, I have explored different narrative focalizations and voices (I had not previously used the second-person, but found it a good fit for many Artifice stories). I have written stories focalized through children's viewpoints, old people's viewpoints, and those of historical figures. I've experimented with writing stories at greater length, which examine the sensory

environment in minute detail (‘Plinth’), and two-pagers which condense eons of time into single sentences (‘The First Principle’). Moreover, in exploring the outer limits of the Artifice form, I’ve learned to write stories in the adjacent categories of Fantastic and Marvellous (after Todorov).

I aim to find a publisher for *Mayflies* as a single-author collection, after first publishing more individual stories in journals, magazines and anthologies. The emergence, in the past decade, of new literary talents writing Artifice stories — Julia Armfield, Adam Marek, Hassan Blasim, Samantha Schwarblin, Carmen Maria Machado, et al — convince me that the Artifice form continues to find new currency and legitimacy. It’s my hope that this thesis — in rehabilitating some of Todorov’s theories, and as a work of poetics which ventures a definition of the Artifice story — will elucidate some of the opportunities and concerns facing the writer of Artifice stories, and in doing so, point to new avenues of study and creativity.

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Appendix 1: *Mayflies* Story Categorisation

Artifice
Green Boots' Cave
Pyramids
Absent
What Happened
Ghost Story #2
A New World
The Second Principle
Ghost Story #3
Smoking

Fantastic
Anticipation
Ghost Story #1

Marvellous
The First Principle
Cubing for Pleasure and Profit

Edge Cases
The Long Grey Sands
Mayflies
Plinth
Lightning
Тоска
Don't You Remember?

Realist
Tour Guide
Magnetic Resonance Imaging

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